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# A MONK OF CRUTA

BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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# A MONK OF CRUTA

## CHAPTER I

### "THE BLACK-ROBED PHANTOM 'DEATH'"

"FATHER ADRIAN!"

"I am here!"

"I saw the doctor talking with you aside! How long have I to live? He told you the truth! Repeat his words to me!"

The tall, gaunt young priest drew nearer to the bedside, and shook his head with a slow, pitying gesture.

"The time was short—short indeed. Yet, why should you fear? Your confession has been made! I myself have pronounced your absolution; the holy Church has granted to you her most holy sacrament."

"Fear! Bah! I have no fear! It is a matter of calculation. Shall I see morning break?"

"You may; but you will never see the mid-day sun."

The dying man raised himself with a slow, painful movement, and pointed to the window.

"Throw up the window."

He was obeyed. A servant who had been sitting quietly in the shadows of the vast apartment, with his head buried in his hands, rose and did his master's bidding.

"What hour is it?"

"Three o'clock."

"Gomez, strain your eyes seaward. Is there no light on the horizon?"

"None! The storm has wrapped the earth in darkness. Listen!"

A torrent of rain was swept against the streaming window pane, and a gust of wind shook the frame in its sockets. The watcher turned away from the window with a mute gesture of despair. No eye could pierce that black chaos. He sank again into his seat, and looked around shuddering. The high, vaulted chamber was lit by a pair of candles only, leaving the greater part of it in gloom. Grim, fantastic shadows lurked in the corners, and lay across the bare floor. Even the tall figure of the priest, on his knees before a rude wooden crucifix, seemed weird and ghostly. The heavy, mildewed bed-hangings shook and trembled in the draughts which filled the room, and the candles

flickered and burnt low in their sockets. Gomez watched them with a sort of anxious fascination. His master's life was burning out, minute for minute, with those candles. Twenty-five years of constant companionship would be ended in a few brief hours. Gomez was not disposed to trouble much at this; but he bethought himself of a snug little abode in Piccadilly, where the discomforts now surrounding them were quite unknown. Surely, to die there would be a luxury compared with this. He began to feel personally aggrieved that his master should have chosen such an out-of-the-way hole to end his days in. Then came a rush of thought, and he was grave. He knew why! Yes! he knew why!

The dying man lay quite still, almost as though his time were already come. Once he raised himself, and the feeble light flashed across a grey, haggard face and a pair of burning eyes. But his effort was only momentary. He sank back again, and lay there with his eyes half closed, and breathing softly. He was nursing his strength.

One, two, three, four, five! The harsh clanging of a brazen clock somewhere in the building had penetrated to the chamber, followed by a deep, resonant bell. The man on the bed lifted his head.

"How goes the storm?" he asked softly.

Gomez stood up and faced the window.

"The storm dies with the night, sir," he answered. "The wind has fallen."

"When does day break?"

Gomez looked at his watch.

"In one hour, sir."

"Stay by the window, Gomez, and let your eyes watch for the dawn."

The priest frowned. "Surely the time has come when you should quit your hold on earthly things," he said quietly. "What matters the dawn! soon you will lose yourself in an everlasting sleep, and the dawn for you will be eternity. Take this crucifix, and pray with me."

The dying man pushed it away with a gesture almost contemptuous.

"Is there no light on the sea yet, Gomez?" he asked anxiously.

Gomez leant forward till his face touched the window pane. He strained his eyes till they ached; but the darkness was impenetrable. Yet stay,—what was that? A feeble yellow light was glimmering far away in the heart of that great gulf of darkness. He held his breath, and watched it steadily. Then he turned round.

"There is a light in the far distance, sir," he said. "I cannot tell what it may be, but there is a light."

A wave of excitement passed over the strong, wasted features of the man upon the bed. He half raised himself, and his voice was almost firm.

"Push my bed to the window," he ordered.

The two men, priest and servant, bent all their strength to the task, and inch by inch they moved the great, creaking structure. When at last they had succeeded, and paused to take breath, the light in the distance had become stronger and more apparent. Together the three men watched it grow; master and servant, with breathless eagerness, the priest with a show of displeasure in his severe face. Suddenly Gomez gave a little cry.

"The dawn!" he exclaimed, pointing to the north of the light. "Morning is breaking."

Sure enough, a grey, pallid light was stealing down upon the water. The darkness was becoming a chaos of grey and black; of towering seas and low-lying clouds, with cold white streaks of light falling through them, and piercing the curtains of night. There was no vestige of colouring—nothing but cold grey and slate white. Yet the dawn moved on, and through it the yellow light in the distance gleamed larger and larger.

"Hold me up," ordered the man on the bed. "Prop me up with pillows!"

They did as he bade them, and for the first time his face was fully revealed in the struggling twilight. A flowing grey beard, still plentifully streaked with black, rested upon his chest; and the eyes, steadily fixed upon the window pane, were dark and undimmed. A long illness had wasted his fine features, but had detracted nothing from their strength and regularity of outline. His lips were closely set, and his expression, though painfully eager, was not otherwise displeasing. There was none of the fear of death there; nor was there anything of the passionless resignation of the man who has bidden farewell to life, and made his peace with God and man; nor, in those moments of watching, had his face any of the physical signs of approaching death.

"Ah!"

They started at the sharp, almost triumphant exclamation which had escaped from his white lips, and followed his long, quivering finger. Above that glimmering light was a faint, dim line of smoke, fading on the horizon.

"It is a steamer, indeed," the priest said, with some interest. "She is making for the island."

"When is the supply boat due?" Gomez asked.

"Not for a fortnight," the priest answered; "it is not she, it is a stranger."

There was no other word spoken. Soon the dawn,

moving across the great waste of waters, pierced the dark background behind the steamer's light. The long trail of white, curdling foam in her track gleamed like a silver cleft in a dark gulf. The dim shape of her sails stole slowly into sight, and they could see that she was carrying a great weight of canvas. Then into the grey air, a rocket shot up like a brilliant meteor, and the sound of a gun came booming over the waters.

"Can she make the bay?" Gomez asked suddenly. "Look at the surf."

They all removed their eyes from the steamer, and fixed them nearer home. The darkness had rolled away, and the outlook, though a little uncertain in the misty morning light, was still visible. Right before the window, a little to the left, a great rocky hill, many hundreds of feet high, ran sheer down into the sea, and facing it on the right, was a lower range of rocks running out from the mainland. Inside the natural harbour thus formed, the sea was quiet enough; but at the entrance, a line of white breakers and huge ocean waves were leaping up against the base of the promontory, and dashing over the lower range of rocks. Beyond, the sea was wild and rough, and the steamer was often almost lost to sight in the hollow of the waves.

"Ah!"

The faces of all three men underwent a sudden change. Three rockets, one after another, shot up into the sky from the top of the rocky hill, leaving a faint, violet glow overhead. The dying man set his teeth hard, and his eyes glistened.

"Three rockets," he muttered. "What is the meaning of that signal, Father?" he asked.

The priest looked downward, pityingly. "It is a warning that the entrance to the bay is unsafe," he answered. "Take comfort; it is the hand of God keeping from you those who would distract your dying thoughts from Heaven. Take comfort, and pray with me."

He seemed strangely deaf to the priest's words, and made no movement or sign in response. Only he kept his eyes the more steadfastly fixed upon the steamer, now plainly visible. His face showed no disappointment. It seemed almost as though he might have seen across the grey sea, and heard the stern orders thundered out from a slim, motionless figure on the captain's bridge. "Right ahead, helmsman! Never mind the signal. There's fifty pounds for every man of you if we make the bay. It's not so bad as it looks! Back me up like brave lads, and I'll remember it all your lives!"

Almost, too, he might have heard the answering

cheer, for a faint smile parted his white lips as he saw the steamer ploughing her way heavily straight ahead, paying no heed to the warning signal.

On she came. The priest and the servant started as they saw her intention, and a sharp ejaculation of surprise escaped from the former. Side by side, they watched the labouring vessel with strained eyes. Her hull and shape were now visible in the dim morning twilight, as she rose and fell upon the waves. It was evident that she was a large, handsome pleasure yacht, daintily but strongly built.

Close up against the high, bare window the three watchers, unconsciously enough, formed a striking-looking group. The priest, tall, pale, and severe, stood in the shadow of the bed-curtains, an impressive and solemn figure in his dark, flowing robes, but with the impassibility of his features curiously disturbed. He, who had been preaching calm, was himself agitated. He had drawn a little on one side, so that the cold grey light should not fall upon his face and betray its twitching lips and quivering pallor; but if either of the men who shared his watch had thought to glance at him, the sickly candlelight would have shown at once what he was so anxious to conceal. It was little more than chance which had brought this man to die in his island monastery, and under his care; little

more than chance which had revealed to him this wonderful secret. But the agony of those last few hours, and the gloomy words of the priest who leant over his bedside, had found their way in between the joints of the dying man's armour of secrecy. Word by word, the story had been wrested from him. In the cold and comfortless hour of death, the strong, worldly man felt his physical weakness loosen the iron bands of his will, and he became for a time almost like a child in the hands of the keen, swiftly-questioning priest. He had not found much comfort in the mumbled prayers and absolution, which were all he got in exchange for his life's secret,—and such a secret! He had not, indeed, noticed the fixed, far-away gaze in the priest's dark eyes as he knelt by the bedside; but his prayers, his faint words of comfort, had fallen like drops of ice upon his quickened desire to be brought a little nearer to that mysterious, shadowy essence of goodness which was all his mind could conceive of a God. It had seemed like a dead form of words, lifeless, hopeless, monotonous; and all that faint striving to attain to some knowledge of the truth —if indeed truth there was—had been crushed into ashes by it. As he had lived, so must he die, he told himself with some return of that philosophic quietude which had led him, stout-hearted and brave, through

many dangers. And, at that moment when he had been striving to detach his thoughts from their vain task of conjuring up useless regrets, there had come what even now seemed to be the granting of his last passionate prayer. The man whom he had longed to see once more before his eyes were closed forever upon the world, with such a longing that his heart had grown sick and weary with the burden of it, had been brought as though by a miracle almost to his side. He knew as though by some strange instinct the measure of his strength. He had no fear of dying before his heart's dearest wish could be gratified. If only that fiercely labouring vessel succeeded in her brave struggle, he knew that there would be strength left to him to bear the shock of meeting, to bear even the shock of the tidings which could either sweeten his last few moments, or deepen the gloom of his passage into the unknown world. And so he lay there, with fixed, glazed eyes and shortened breath, watching and waiting.

The supreme moment came; the steamer had reached the dangerous point, and the waves were breaking over her with such fury that more than once she vanished altogether from sight, only to reappear in a moment or two, quivering and trembling from stern to hull like a living creature. After all, the struggle was a

brief one, though it seemed long to the watchers at the window. In less than ten minutes it was over; she had passed the line of breakers, and was in the comparatively smooth water of the bay, heading fast for the shore under leeway of the great wall of towering rocks, at the foot of which she seemed dwarfed almost into the semblance of a boy's toy vessel. Within a quarter of a mile from the shore, she anchored, and a boat was let down from her side.

A new lease of life seemed to have come to the man on the bed. The morning sun had half emerged from a bank of angry purple-coloured clouds, and its faint slanting beams lay across the white coverlet of the bed, and upon his face. His eyes were bright and eager, and the death-like pallor seemed to have passed from his features. His voice, too, was firm and distinct.

"Place my despatch-box upon the table here, Gomez," he ordered.

Gomez left his seat by the window, and, opening a portmanteau, brought a small black box to the bedside. His master passed his hand over it, and drew it underneath the coverlet.

"I am prepared," he murmured, half to himself. "Father, according to the physician's reckoning, how long have I to live?"

"Barely an hour," answered the priest, without removing his eyes from the boat, whose progress he seemed to be scanning steadfastly. "Is your eternal future of so little moment to you," he went on in a tone of harsh severity, "that you can give your last thoughts, your last few moments, to affairs of this world? 'Tis an unholy death! Take this cross in your hands, and listen not to those whose coming will surely estrange you from heaven. Let the world take its own course, but lift your eyes and heart in prayer! Everlasting salvation, or everlasting doom, awaits you before yonder sun be set!"

"I have no fear, Father," was the quiet reply. "What is, is; a few frantic prayers now could alter nothing, and, besides, my work on earth is not yet over. Speak to me no more of the end! Nothing that you or I could do now would bring me one step nearer heaven. Gomez, your eyes are good! Whom do you see in the boat?"

Gomez answered without turning round from the window, "Mr. Paul is there, sir, steering!"

"Thank God!"

"There are others with him, sir!"

"Others! Who?"

"Strangers to me, sir. There is a man, a gentleman by his dress and appearance, and a child—a girl, I think. Two sailors from the yacht are rowing."

The dying man knitted his brows, and his fingers convulsively clutched at the bed-clothes. He had lost something of that calm and effortless serenity which seemed to have fallen upon him since the safety of the steamer had been assured.

"The boat is quite close, Gomez! Can you not describe the stranger?"

"I can only see that he is thin, rather tall, and, I think, elderly, sir. He is very much wrapped up, as though he were an invalid."

"Lift me up so that I can see them. Father Adrian will help you."

The priest shook his head. "The effort would probably cost you your life," he said, "and it would be useless. Before you could see them the boat would be round the corner."

"So near! God grant me strength! Gomez, give me a tablespoonful of the brandy!"

Gomez moved silently to his side, and poured out the brandy. Afterwards his master closed his eyes, and there was an intense silence in the chamber—the deep, breathless silence of expectancy.

The monastery itself, a small and deserted one, tenanted only by a few half-starved monks of one of the lower orders of the Church, was wrapped in a profound gloom. There was no sound from the half-ruined

chapel or the long, empty corridors. The storm had ceased, and the casements no longer rattled in the wind. To the man who lay there, nursing his fast-ebbing strength, it seemed indeed like the silence before the one last tragedy of death, looming so black and so grim before him.

It was broken at last. Away at the end of the corridor the faint sound of hurrying footsteps and subdued voices reached the ears of the three watchers. They came nearer and nearer, halting at last just outside the door. There was a knock, a quick, impetuous answer, and the visitors entered, ushered in by the priest, who had met them on the threshold.

Of the two men, one advanced hastily with outstretched hand and pitying face to the bedside; the other moved only a step or two further into the room, and stood looking intently, yet without any salutation or form of recognition, at the dying man. The former, when he reached the bed, sank on his knees and took the white hand which lay upon the coverlet between his.

"Father! My father! I would have given the world to have found you better. Tell me that it is not true what they say. You will pull round now that I have come!"

There was no answer. The dying man did not even

look into the handsome young face so close to his. His eyes, bright and unnaturally large, were rivetted upon the figure at the foot of the bed. His breath came quickly, and he was shivering; an inarticulate sort of moan came from his lips.

"Father! you are agitated, and no wonder, to see him here. You had my letter preparing you; nothing that I could do would stop his coming."

It was Gomez who answered, advancing out of the gloom: "There has been no letter."

There was an instant's silence. Then the younger man rose up, pale as death. "God! what a fool I was to trust to mails in this out-of-the-way hole! Father! I shall never forgive myself. Blind idiot that I was, to bring him in like this."

It seemed as if no one save he possessed the power of speech. There was a dead silence. He looked from one to another of the figures in that silent drama in fast-growing despair. The face of the man whom he had brought there revealed little, although in a certain way its expression was remarkable. The lips were parted in a slow, quiet smile, not in itself sardonic or cruel, although under the circumstances it seemed so, for it was difficult to associate any idea of mirth with the scene which was passing in that grim, gloomy chamber. Something of the awe inseparable from

this close approach of death was visible in the faces of all the other watchers. Not so in his! It was the contrast which seemed so strange. He stood there, with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his long travelling coat, returning the fixed, glazed stare of the dying man with a sort of indifferent good humour. Perhaps a very close observer might have detected a shade of mockery in those soft black eyes and faintly twitching lips, but the light in the room was too obscure for any one there to penetrate beneath the apparent indifference. It was he who broke that deep, tragic silence, and his voice, light and even gay, struck a strange note in that solemn chamber of death.

"So you are dying, Martin, *mon ami?* How odd! If any one had told me one short month ago that I should have been here to watch your last moments, and start you on your journey to hell, bah! how mad I should have thought them. 'Tis a pleasure I never anticipated."

His words seemed to dissolve the lethargy which his presence had cast over the dying man. He turned away towards the younger figure by his side.

"How came he here?" he asked feebly.

"Listen, and I will tell you," was the low reply. "I sought him first at Monaco, but he had not been

heard of there for two years. Then I found traces of him at Algiers; and followed up the clue to Cairo, Athens, Syracuse, and Belgrade. It was at Constantinople I found him at last—an officer—actually an officer in the Turkish army; 'Monsieur le Captaine,' my interpreter called him," the young man added, with a fine scorn in his raised voice. "Imagine it! Well, I gave him your letter, delivered the messages, and awaited his pleasure. He kept me waiting for two days before he vouchsafed one word of answer. On the third day he announced his intention of accompanying me here. Nothing that I could say made any difference. 'His answer should be given to you in person, or not at all.' I wrote to you three days before we started; that letter you never had. Forgive me, father, for the shock! As for you," he continued, turning abruptly towards the motionless figure at the foot of the bed, "I have kept my word, and brought you here in safety, though no one in the world will ever know how near I came to breaking it, and throwing you into the Dardanelles. Ah! I was sorely tempted, I can tell you. Speak your answer, and go! This is no place for you to linger in."

"Upon my word, you are courteous, very! But, my dear friend Martin, as this is to be our farewell, I must really see you a little more distinctly."

For the first time, the man in the long overcoat changed his position, and came a little nearer to the bed. The movement showed him the priest, kneeling with closed eyes and uplifted hands before an iron crucifix.

"Ah! we are not quite alone then, Martin, *cher ami!* the gentleman in the long robe appears to be listening."

"He is as dead," answered the man on the bed slowly. "He is a monk; you can speak."

He raised himself slightly on the bed. One hand remained grasping his despatch-box under the bed-clothes; the other was held by the young man who knelt by his side. His face was curiously changed; all the effect of his unlooked-for visitor's arrival seemed to have passed away. His eyes were bright and eager. His white lips were closely set and firm.

"You can speak," he repeated.

His visitor was leaning over the foot of the bed now, and the smile had quite gone, leaving his face cold and white. He spoke a little quicker than before.

"Here is your answer, Martin de Vaux! You offer me a fortune, on condition that I give up to you on your deathbed the power by which I hold those whom you love, my slaves. Money is dear to me, as it is to most men, but I would die sooner than touch yours. Curse you, and your money, and your family! Not for

all the gold that was ever coined would I yield up my power! My day will come, and may the evil spirit bring you tidings of it down into hell! Curse you, Martin de Vaux! Now you know my mind."

The dying man was strangely calm. From under the bed-clothes came the faint sound of the opening and shutting of the despatch-box.

"Yes, I know your mind," he repeated quietly. "You mean me to die with the torturing thought that I have left a poisonous reptile to suck the life and blood from those I love, and the honour from a grand old name. But I will not! We will take our next journey together, Victor."

A sudden change had crept into his tone before the last sentence; and before it had died away, the priest and the man by the bedside had leaped to their feet in horror. He whom they had thought too weak to stir was sitting bolt upright in bed, his eyes blazing and his hand extended. There was a line of fire, a loud report, and then a single cry of agony. The man who had leaned over the foot of the bed lay on the ground just as he had fallen, shot dead through the heart, and a child, dark-skinned and thin, who had rushed in at the sound of the report, was sobbing passionately with her arms wound around him. Across the bed, still grasping the pistol, but with his hands hanging

helplessly down, lay the man who had fired the shot. The effort had killed him.

The priest was the first in the room to move. He slowly bent over both bodies, and then turned round to the other man.

"Dead?" he asked, with a dry, choking gasp.

"Both dead."

The priest and his companion, shocked and unnerved, looked at one another in silence. The child's sobs grew louder, and the morning sunlight stole across the bare floor, and fell upon the white, still faces.

The tragedy was over, and the seeds of another sown.

## CHAPTER II

### "THE NEW ART"

A TALL, fair young man stood in the small alcove of Lady Swindon's drawing-room, with his eyes fixed upon the door. He was accurately dressed in the afternoon garb of a London man about town, and carried in his hand, or rather in his hands, for they were crossed behind him, that hall-mark of Western civilization—a well-brushed, immaculate silk hat. Neither in his clothes nor personal appearance was there any striking difference between him and the crowd of other young men who thronged the rooms, except perhaps that he was a trifle better made, and pleasanter to look at than most of them, and that the air of boredom, so apparent on most of their faces and in their manners, was in his case perfectly natural. As a matter of fact, he hated afternoon receptions, and was only waiting for a favourable opportunity to make his exit unnoticed.

"Paul, my boy, you don't look happy," exclaimed a voice in his ear.

Paul de Vaux turned upon the new-comer sharply.

"Not likely to, Arthur. You know I hate all this sort of thing, and, as far as I can see, it's just a repetition of the usual performance—stale speeches, lionizing, gossip, and weak tea. I consider you've brought me here under false pretences. Where's the startling novelty you promised me?"

"All in good time," was the cool reply. "You'll thank your stars you're here in a minute or two."

Paul de Vaux looked at his brother incredulously. "Some sell of yours, I suppose," he remarked. "At any rate, no one here whom I have spoken to seems to be expecting anything unusual."

Arthur—no one ever called him anything else—laughed, and beat an impatient tattoo upon the floor with his foot. He was several inches shorter than his brother, and altogether unlike him. Yet he, too, was good-looking, in a certain way.

"That's just the beauty of it," he said. "Lady Swindon has prepared a little surprise for her guests. She's just that sort of woman, you know. Denison told me about it at the club, a few minutes before you came in for lunch. I shouldn't have bothered you to come if I hadn't known there was something good on."

"I dislike surprises," his brother answered wearily. "Half the pleasure of a thing lies in anticipation, and surprises rob one of that. Let us go, Arthur; there

are plenty here to enjoy this novelty, whatever it is. Come and have a weed at my rooms, and we'll talk over something for to-night."

Arthur shook his head. and laid his hand upon Paul's coat-sleeve. "You don't know what's coming off, old fellow; I wouldn's miss it for anything. Great Scott! there's the bishop. Wonder how he'll like it? and there's Lady May over there, Paul. You're booked, old man, if she looks this way."

Paul leant forward with a faint show of interest, and looked in the direction indicated. "I thought that the Westovers went North yesterday," he remarked. "Lady May said that they expected it."

"Likely enough. 'Gad! the performance is going to commence," Arthur exclaimed, quickly. "Paul, you are going to have a new sensation. You are going to see the most beautiful woman in the world."

There was a little hush, and every one had turned towards the upper end of the room. Some heavy curtains had been rolled aside, disclosing a space, only a few yards square, which had been covered by a tightly stretched drugget. There was a little curious anticipation amongst the uninitiated. Then the comparative silence was broken by the strains of a waltz from a violin, somewhere in the background. No one had ever heard it before. There was a wilder, dreamier

air with it, than anything Waldteufel had ever written. And, while every one was wondering whose music it could be, a woman glided out from behind a screen, and stood for a second swaying herself slightly in the centre of the drugget. Even that slight rhythmical motion of her body seemed to bring her into perfect sympathy with the curious melody which was filling the hushed room. And while the people watched her, already, in varying degrees, under the spell of that curious fascination which her personality and the exercise of her art seldom failed to excite, she commenced to dance.

Long afterwards Paul de Vaux tried to describe in words, that dance, and found that he could not, for there was indeed a charm beyond expression or portrayal in the slow, almost languid movements, full of infinite and inexpressible witchery. Every limb of her body and every feature of her face followed, with a sort of effortless grace, the movements of her feet. Yet the general effect of the whole was suggestive of a sweet and dainty repose, voluptuous yet refined, glowing with life, yet dreamily restful. In a certain sense her physical movements, even her body itself, seemed merged and lost in the artistic ideal created and born of her performance. And so it was that he carried away that day no vivid thought-portrait of her features, only a confused dream of a beautiful dusky face,

rising above a cloud of amber draperies, the lips slightly parted in a wonderful smile, and a pair of heavily-lidded eyes, which, more than once, had rested upon him, soft, dark, and lustrous. After all, it was but a tangled web of memories, yet, such as it was, it became woven into the pattern of his life, wonderfully soft and brilliant beside some of those dark, gloomy threads which fate had spun for him.

The performance ended, as such performance should end, suddenly, and without repetition. Her disappearance was so swift and yet so graceful, that for a moment or two people scarcely realized that she was gone. It was wonderful what a difference her absence made to the room. The little stretch of drugget looked mean and bare. To Paul de Vaux it seemed as though some warm, beautiful light, omniscient and richly coloured, had suddenly burnt out, and left a damp chilliness in the air. The silence was gloomy enough after that wonderful music, but the babble of tongues which presently arose was a hundred times worse. He found himself chafing and angry at the commonplacisms which everywhere greeted his ear. Lady Swindon's afternoon entertainment had been a great success, and every one was telling her so, more or less volubly. There were some there, a handful of artists and a few thoughtful men, who were silent, or who spoke of it

only amongst themselves in subdued voices. They recognised, in what had happened that afternoon, the dawn of a new art, or rather the regeneration of an old one, and they discussed in whispers its possible significance and influence. She was an artist, that woman. No one doubted it. But the woman was there as well as the artist. Who was she? Would she realize the sanctity of her mission, and keep herself fit and pure for its accomplishment? Had she character to sustain her, and imagination to idealize her calling? She was on a pinnacle now, but it was a pinnacle as dangerous as the feet of woman could press. If only she could keep herself unspotted from the world, which would do its best to drag her down, they all felt, painter, poet, and musician, that her influence with the age might rank with their own. But was it possible? A certain Diana-like coldness had been apparent to those who had the eyes to see it, even in her most voluptuous movements. They knew that it was not assumed for the sake of adding piquancy to her performance—it was there indeed. But side by side with it there were unprobed depths of passion in her soft, deep eyes; a slumbering passion even in the sinuous, graceful movements of every limb. Some day the struggle would come, even if it had not

already commenced. The woman against the artist —the woman tempted and flattered by a thousand tongues, and dazzled with visions of all those things so naturally sweet to her, her own nature even, so keenly susceptible to love and sympathy, siding with the enemy. This, all against what? Only that inward worshipping of all things sweet and pure and lofty, which is the artist's second life. The odds were heavy indeed. No wonder that the select few who spoke of her that afternoon should shake their heads and look grave.

## CHAPTER III

### "A DANCING GIRL"

"WHAT do you think of it?"

Paul started. He had been standing, like a man in a dream, with folded arms, looking across the room with idle eyes, and unconsciously ignoring many salutations. His brother's tone sounded oddly in his ears, and he looked flushed and a little nervous.

"What did I think of it!" It was a difficult question to answer. He repeated it, and was glad when Arthur spared him the necessity of replying, by adding his own opinion.

"It was glorious, magnificent! I'm going to find out more about her!"

He strolled away, and joined one of the little groups of men who were discussing the performance. Paul, at first, had made a gesture as though to detain him, but on second thoughts he had changed his mind. Better let him go and find out what he could.

He himself watched carefully for his opportunity, and then left the room. He felt like a man who has received a silent shock. Something fresh had come

into his life, noiselessly, insidiously, without effort. He pressed on his hat, and passed down the steps out into the street, scarcely conscious of what he was doing.

The rush of fresh air somewhat revived him, and he stood still for a moment to collect his thoughts. He felt the need of absolute solitude for a while, to help him to realize—or at any rate to understand—this thing which had happened, and with almost feverish haste he called a hansom from the other side of the road. The man whipped up the horse, but hesitated as he reached the pavement. Looking around, Paul saw the cause of his indecision. A woman, standing only a few yards behind, had called him at the same time, and was waiting also for his approach.

There was a gas-lamp between them, and as their eyes met, he recognised her. Even in that flickering light, and through her veil, there was no mistaking those wonderful eyes. As a rule, he was possessed of as much *savoir faire* as most men of his class, but at that moment it had deserted him. He stood there on the edge of the pavement, without moving or saying anything, simply looking at her, startled at her sudden appearance, and magnetised by her close presence. He had heard no footfall behind him, and the fact of her being alone seemed so strange to him, that he simply could not realize for a moment that it was in-

deed she who stood so close to him. The cabman, leaving them to decide who had the prior claim upon him, sat motionless, with his eyes discreetly fixed upon his horse's ears. It was an odd little tableau, insignificant enough to a spectator, save, perhaps, for the curious look in the woman's face and softly flashing eyes. Yet it left its mark for ever in the lives of the two principal figures.

The curious sensation which had kept Paul standing there dazed and tongue-tied, passed away. Yet it did not immediately occur to him to raise his hat and walk on, as in any ordinary case he would have done. He was conscious of the exact nature of the situation, but he felt a strong disinclination to leave the spot; nor, strangely enough, did she seem to expect it. Yet something had to be done.

He moved a step nearer her He was no schoolboy, this tall, grave-looking young Englishman. The lines across his fair, smooth forehead, and by his close-set mouth spoke for themselves. He had seen life in many aspects, and in a certain Indian jungle village, there were natives and coolies who still spoke admiringly of the wonderful nerve and pluck of the English sahib during a terrible and unexpected tiger rush. But at that moment his nerve seemed to have deserted him. He could almost hear his heart beat as

he took that step forward. He had intended to have made some trifling apology, and to have handed her into the cab, but the words would not come. Some instinct seemed to revolt at the thought of uttering any such commonplacism. She was standing on the edge of the pavement, close to the step, with her skirts in one hand, slightly raised. He held out his hand to her in silence.

She gave him hers; and yet she did not at once step into the cab. She seemed to be expecting that little speech from him which he found impossible to frame, and, seeing that it did not come, recognising, perhaps, his suppressed agitation behind that calm, almost cold, gravity of demeanour, she spoke to him.

"It is a shame to take your cab, and leave you in the rain! I am sorry."

Afterwards her admirers spoke of her voice as being one of her chief charms; to Paul it sounded like a soft strain of very sweet, throbbing music, reaching him from some far distant world. Yet, curiously enough, it went far to dissolve the spell which her presence seemed to have laid upon him. He was able to look at her steadily, and standing upon the wet pavement in the cold, grey light of that November afternoon, their eyes met in a long, searching gaze. He was able even to notice trifles. He saw the rich fur

which lined her plain, black cloak, and he could even admire the absolute perfection with which it followed the lines of her slim, supple, figure. He saw the glowing eyes shining out from her dusky face, and the coils of brown hair, not very securely fastened under her turban hat. As she put out her foot to enter the cab, he could even catch a glimpse of the amber draperies concealed by her cloak. A dancer! A public dancer! His eyes swept over her again, taking in every detail of her simple but rich toilette, and he shivered slightly. Then he answered her, "It is of no consequence, thank you. I can walk."

"But you will get very wet! Let us make a compromise! You may come with me. I am going only a very little distance, and then you can take the cab on to your home, or wherever you want to go to."

She stepped in, taking it for granted that he would accept her offer, and he followed her at once. He was not in the least surprised. From the first he had not expected to leave her, and her invitation seemed perfectly natural to him. She gave the cabman her address through the trap-door, and they drove off together.

At the corner of the square, two men were standing together talking, and as the hansom passed within a yard or two of them both glanced idly in, and then started.

Paul, who had been looking straight ahead of him, and seeing nothing, turned round, startled by a familiar exclamation, just in time to see his brother Arthur, and Leslie Horton, gazing after the cab. The incident troubled him, as much for her sake as his own. But, looking into her face, he could not see that she was in any way disturbed, although she must have seen the two men, and would probably have recognised them as having been present at Lady Swindon's reception. Her face was quite unmoved, but in a moment or two she asked a question.

"Who was the younger and better looking of those two men; the one with violets in his coat, like yours?"

"It was my brother," he answered simply. "I am afraid, too, that he recognised you."

"So far as I am concerned, that is of no consequence at all," she answered lightly.

He turned away with a sudden sinking of the heart. He knew, too well, that her carelessness was not assumed. How was he to interpret it?

Their drive was finished in silence, and they pulled up before a handsome, though somewhat sombre-looking house in a back street.

"My rooms are here," she remarked.

He stepped on to the pavement, and assisted her

to alight. The thought of leaving her so abruptly was painful to him, and yet he dreaded to hear her invite him to go in with her; nevertheless, she did so.

"If you are not in a hurry, perhaps you will come in, and let me give you a cup of tea," she said, looking him full in the face.

His heart sank. What was he to think now? And yet he was absurdly glad that he was not to leave her.

"Do you mean it?" he asked.

"Of course! I should not have asked you else. Are you very much shocked?" she added, with a mocking gleam in her eyes. "It is not proper, is it! I confess I did not think of that. But do come," she added, with a sudden bewitching smile.

"I shall be delighted," he answered, gravely enough, but truthfully. He turned to pay the cabman, and followed her into the house.

"My rooms are upstairs," she remarked, leading the way. "The luxury of a first floor is at present beyond me."

Her words pleased him, but their effect died away when she opened a door on the first landing, and ushered him in. Such of the interior of the house as he had seen was handsomely furnished, but the room in which he stood was almost like a fairy chamber. Curtains divided it in the centre, and beyond he could see a table laid for dinner.

"That half I use for a dining-room," she remarked, pointing towards it with one of her gloves, which she had just taken off. "It makes this room small, but it is a convenient arrangement. Do sit down!"

He bowed, but remained standing, with his elbow resting upon the draped mantel-board. She took off her hat and coat, hanging them over the back of a chair, and advanced towards him.

She was in her dancing dress, a floating mass of yellow draperies, and the firelight gleamed strangely upon her dusky, perfect face, with its olive colouring, and soft, glowing eyes. She came so close to him that a faint odour from the handkerchief in her hand stole up to him.

He was playing with an ornament on the shelf, and his fingers tightened convulsively around it. It snapped in two in his hand; he did not notice it. He leaned forward towards her, and his strong voice vibrated with feeling.

"And it was for this then, Adrea Kiros, that you ran away from the convent St. Lucile! My God!"

## CHAPTER IV

### ADREA'S DIARY

To-day I have made my entrance in the first scene of the drama of life. To-day, therefore, I commence my memoirs. Everything before goes for nothing!

As I have removed myself altogether from all association with the humdrum existence which might have been mine, I am naturally friendless for the present. So far as the other sex is concerned, I fancy that that could be easily remedied. But no women are likely to care about making my acquaintance, and I am glad of it. I hate women—men, too, I think! At any rate, there will be no one of whom I shall make a confidant, so I have chosen you, my silent friend. I gave a guinea for you in Bond Street, and with your dainty morocco case and binding, I think you are well worth it. At any rate, you will be faithful so far as silence is concerned.

To-day has been an eventful one. I have made my *debut* as a dancer, and Paul de Vaux has been here, in this house, alone with me! That is hard to realize,

but it is so! He has altered since he used to pay me periodical visits at the convent—and so have I, I imagine! Yet he recognised me! How pale and stern he looked when he stood up on the hearthrug and called me by my name! He is very handsome—handsomer now even than on that day when he stood by, in that chamber of death, and saw my father murdered, without lifting his hand. Ah! Paul de Vaux, Paul de Vaux! that was an evil day for you! Did you never think that that little brown girl, as you called her, would grow up some day; or did you think that she would forget! Bah! What fools men are!

He remembered me! How grave he looked, and yet how tender his voice sounded! He did not forget that he was my guardian, and I his ward. How bewildered and anxious he was! Was I living quite alone, had I no friends, did I think it wise to lay myself open to so much notice?

He had come close to my chair, and was leaning down, so that his head nearly touched mine. Really, when I looked up, I thought that he was going to take me into his arms. I looked up and laughed softly into his face.

He said no more. I invited him to dine with me, and promised to dance to him afterwards. I even let my hand rest for a moment upon his shoulder, and

whispered—but *n'importe!* He behaved just as I would have had him behave! He took up his hat and walked straight out of the room! It was rude, but it was magnificent. Ah! Paul de Vaux! you may struggle as long as you like, but in the end you will be mine!

## CHAPTER V

### "THE FAR-OFF MUTTERING OF THE STORM TO COME"

"PAUL!"

Paul had walked, unannounced into his mother's favourite little sitting-room at Vaux Court, tired and travel-stained. She rose to her feet and looked at him anxiously.

"Don't be alarmed, mother," he said, stooping down and kissing her. "There's nothing at all the matter."

"Arthur is well?"

"Quite well; I was with him yesterday afternoon. There's nothing the matter. London was boring me, that's all, and I thought I'd run down here and have a look at the old place, and perhaps a day's hunting."

Relieved of her anxiety, Mrs. de Vaux was unaffectedly pleased to see her eldest son. She was a fine, white-haired old lady, dignified and handsome, but with very few soft lines about her comely face.

"I am delighted to see you, of course, Paul! The meet is at Dytchley woods to-morrow! I hope you'll

have a good day. Take your coat off. I have rung for some tea."

"Thanks! How bright and cheerful the fire seems. I walked from the station, and it was miserably cold."

"Of course it was. I wish I had known you were coming. We have so little work for the carriage horses."

"I did not make up my mind until half an hour before the train started," Paul answered. "Dick Carruthers wanted me to run over to Paris with him for a couple of days, and I was undecided which to do. I heard that it was cold and wet there, though; and there is always a charm about this old place which makes me glad to come back to it."

"There is not such another place in England," his mother remarked, pouring out the tea. "Although this is such an outlandish county, there have been a dozen people here this week, asking to be allowed to see over the Abbey. I always give permission when you are away, and there is no one stopping here."

Paul drank his tea, and stretched himself out in his low chair with an air of comfort.

'I am glad you let them see the place, mother," he said. "It is only right. What class of people do you have, as a rule? Clergymen and ecclesiastical architects, I suppose?"

"Chiefly. There are a good many Americans, though; and yesterday, or the day before, a Roman Catholic priest. He spent the day in the cloisters and wandering about the Abbey, I believe."

Paul looked up suddenly, and drew his chair back out of the firelight. For the first time, his mother noticed how pale and ghastly his face was.

"Paul, are you ill?" she asked anxiously. "What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I am only tired. It is a long journey, you know,—and the walk from the station. Indeed, it is nothing else. I am quite well."

His mother resumed her seat. She had risen in sudden alarm. Her son's face had frightened her.

"You look just as your poor father used to look sometimes," she said softly. "It always frightened me. It was as though you had a pain somewhere, or had suddenly seen a ghost. You are sure you are well?"

"Quite, mother! You need have no fear. Arthur and I have your constitution, I think."

His tone was deeper, almost hollow. He still kept his chair back amongst the shadows. Mrs. de Vaux was only partially satisfied.

"I am afraid you have been keeping too late hours, Paul, or reading too much. Lord Westover was say-

ing the other day that you were in a very Bohemian set—journalists and artists, and those sort of people. I am afraid they keep awful hours."

"Lord Westover knows nothing about it," Paul answered wearily. "Ordinary London society would tire me to death in a fortnight. There is another class of people, though, whose headquarters are in London, far more cultured, and quite as exclusive, with whom association is a far greater distinction. I can go anywhere in the first set, because I am Paul de Vaux, of Vaux Abbey, and have forty thousand a year. I am permitted to enter the other only as the author of an unfashionable novel, which a few of them have thought leniently of. Which seem the worthier conditions?"

"I am answered, Paul. Of course, in a sense, you are right. I am an old woman, and the twaddle of a London drawing-room would fall strangely upon my ears now, but I had my share of it before Arthur was born. If I were a man, I should want variety,—a little sauce,—and you are right to seek for it. And now, won't you go and have a bath, and change your things. You still look pale, and I think it would refresh you. Shall I ring for Reynolds? I suppose you have not brought your own man?"

He stretched out his hand, and arrested her fingers upon the bell. "In a moment, mother. It is so com-

fortable here, and I really think it is my favourite room."

He looked round approvingly. It was a curious, hexagonal chamber, with an oak-beamed ceiling, curving into a dome. The walls were hung with a wonderful tapestry of a soft, rich colour, and every piece of furniture in the room was of the Louis Quinze period. There was scarcely a single anachronism. The Martin de Vaux of forty years ago had been an artist, and a man of taste; and when he had brought home his bride, a duke's daughter, he had spent a small fortune on this apartment. Since then it had always been her favourite, and she was always glad to hear any one praise it.

"I seldom sit in any other," she remarked complacently. "The blue drawing-room is open to-night, but that is because Lord and Lady Westover are dining here. I am afraid May will not be able to come; she has a cold or something of the sort. I wonder whether it is true, what they say, that she is delicate."

Paul did not appear much interested. He had a purpose in lingering here, and it had nothing to do with May Westover's health. There was a little information he wished to obtain without exciting his mother's curiosity. But it was not exactly an easy matter.

"I was interested in what you said about the visitors here," he remarked. "I daresay to Americans this place must be very interesting."

"You would think so if you saw some of them. They are a great deal too inquisitive and familiar for Reynolds. He detests them. It is far more interesting to think of that Catholic priest who was here the other day. He lingered about the place as though he had known it all his life, and loved it; and, Reynolds says, he prayed for two hours in the chapel."

"Did you see him yourself?"

"Yes, in the distance. I did not notice him particularly. I wished afterwards that I had. Reynolds' report of him pleased me so much. I daresay he was conjuring up pictures of the days when the old Abbey was full of grey-hooded monks, and the chapel was echoing day and night to their solemn chants and prayers. Sometimes, in the gloaming, I can almost fancy myself that I see them kneeling in long rows in those rich stalls, and hear the rustle of their gowns as they pass slowly down the aisles. I think he must have found it sad to linger about in that beautiful chapel, so cold, and empty, and bare. That is why I like Roman Catholics. They have such a strong reverential affection for their places of worship, and take such a delight in adorning them. It is almost like a personal love."

Paul moved uneasily in his chair and looked steadily into the fire. "Then you did not notice him particularly?"

"Notice him! Notice whom?"

"This priest, or whoever he was."

"I did not see his face, Paul, if that is what you mean. I only remember that he was tall. You seem very much interested in him. No doubt Reynolds could tell you anything you wish to know. Here he is; you had better ask him."

A grey-headed man-servant had entered, bearing a lamp. Mrs. de Vaux turned to him.

"Reynolds, Mr. Paul is interested in hearing about the priest who spent so much time looking over the Abbey yesterday. Can you describe him?"

Reynolds set down the lamp and turned respectfully around. "Not very well, I'm afraid, sir," he said doubtfully. "They all seem so much alike, you know, sir, in those long gowns. He was tall, rather thin, and no hair on his face at all. I can't say that I noticed anything else, except that he spoke in rather a foreign accent."

"You are sure he was a priest, I suppose," Paul asked carelessly. "We hear so much now of impostors, and of things being stolen from places of interest, that it makes one feel suspicious."

"I am quite sure he was no impostor, sir." Reynolds answered confidently. "He was too interested in the place for that. He knew its history better than any one who has ever been here in my day. If he had been one of those sneaking sort of fellows, looking about for what he could get, he would have offered me money, and tried to get rid of me for a time, I think, sir."

"That's true," Paul remarked. "Were you with him all the time, then?"

"Very nearly, sir. He did not like my leaving him at all. He was afraid of missing something worth seeing. Besides, he did not ask to come into the house at all, not even to see the pictures. He spent all his time in the ruins.

"That ends the matter, of course," Paul answered shortly. "There is nothing out there to attract pilferers. Sorry I said anything about it."

"He asked whether you spent much of your time here, and when you would be down again, sir," Reynolds remarked, as he turned to quit the room.

Paul looked up, and then stood quite still for a moment without speaking. A great fear had fallen upon him. Out of the shadows of the past, he seemed to see again that deathbed scene, and the tragedy which had brought down the curtain upon two lives. Almost

he could fancy himself again upon his yacht, with the salt sea spray beating against his face, and the white breakers hissing and seething around him, as they made the dangerous passage towards that faint light, which flickered and gleamed in the distant monastery tower. They are safe! They reach the land; they are hurried into that great, gloomy bed-chamber, where chill draughts rustled ghost-like amongst the heavy, faded hangings, and the feeble candlelight left weird shadows moving across the floor and upon the walls. Again he heard the rattling of the window-panes, bare and exposed to every gust of wind; the far-off thunder of the sea, like a deep, continuous undernote; and, from an almost unseen corner of the chamber, the monotonous, broken rhythm of sad prayers for the dying, mumbled by that dark, curious-looking priest. And then, when the background of the picture had formed itself in his memory, he saw the deed itself. He saw the white, stricken face suddenly ablaze with that last effort of passionate life; he saw the outstretched arm, the line of fire, and the sudden change in the countenance of the man who stood at the foot of the bed. He saw the cool cynicism replaced by a spasm of ghastly fear, and he heard the low, gurgling cry dying away into a faint moan of terror, as the murdered man sank on to the floor, a crumpled heap. And,

last of all, he saw that little brown girl, with her tumbled hair and tear-stained face, clasping the dead body and glaring at every one in the room, with a storm of hatred and impotent fury in her flashing eyes. And that last recollection brought him, like a flash, back to the present,—brought him swift, bewildering memories of Adrea, shaking his heart, and bringing the hot colour streaming into his face. He remembered where he was, and why he had left London. He remembered, too, that he was not alone, and with a little start he awoke to the present.

Reynolds had left the room, and his mother was watching him curiously. He found it hard to meet her steady, questioning gaze without flinching.

"Paul," she said slowly, "you are in trouble."

He shook his head. "It is nothing, mother—nothing at all. I ought to beg your pardon for letting my thoughts run away with me so."

She was too proud to ask him for his confidence, and at that moment the rumbling of a gong reached them from the distant hall. Mrs. de Vaux rose:—

"There are a few people dining here, Paul, so you will not be late."

"I will be down, mother. The usual time, I suppose."

"Yes, eight o'clock."

They left the room together, but parted in the hall. Mrs. de Vaux stayed to speak to the housekeeper for a moment, and Paul ascended the broad staircase alone. On the first corridor he paused, standing before the deep-cushioned sill of a high-arched window, and gazing at the ruined portion of the abbey. The air outside was frosty and clear, and though the moon as yet was only faintly yellow, every arch and cloister was clearly visible. Paul gazed down at them, as he had done all his life, with reverent eyes. There was something almost awesome in the graceful yet bold outline, and in the great age of those rugged, moss-grown pillars and arches, so ecclesiastical in their shape and suggestiveness,—as indeed they might well be, for they were practically the ruins of the old monastery chapel. But, as he looked, the expression in his eyes suddenly changed. A dark figure had passed slowly out from the shadow of the arches, and stood looking up towards the house, rigid, solemn, and motionless. Paul covered his face with his hands, and sank down upon the cushioned window-sill.

## CHAPTER VI

### "AN ASHEN GREY DELIGHT"

"MR. DE VAUX!"

Paul turned quickly around in his saddle towards the young lady who had addressed him. He looked into a fair, thoughtful face, whose general amiability was discounted, just then, by a decided frown.

"I beg your pardon, Lady May! Didn't you say something just now?"

"Didn't I say something just now!" she repeated, with fine scorn. "Upon my word, Mr. de Vaux, I think that you must have left your wits in London! What is the matter with you?

"The matter! Why, nothing! I'm sorry——"

"Oh! pray don't apologise!" she interrupted hastily. "I think I'll ride on and catch papa up."

He laid his hand upon her rein. "Please don't, Lady May," he begged. "I know I've been inattentive! I'm very sorry—really I am. Let me try and make up for it!"

She looked into his face, and she was mollified. He was evidently in earnest.

"Oh! very well," she said. "You mustn't think that I complained without due cause, though, for I spoke to you three times before you answered me. Oh, it's all right," she went on, as he commenced to frame another apology. "I don't mind now, but I really should like to know what is the matter with you. You have ridden all day like a man who valued neither his own life nor his horse's. Some of your jumps were simply reckless! I have heard other people say so, too! I like bold riding, but their is a limit; and though I've ridden two hounds since papa gave me my first pony, I've never seen any one try to jump Annisforth brook below the bridge, before,—and don't want to again," she added, with a little shudder. "I know you ride fine horses, but you are not generally foolhardy. I saw your dark bay mare being taken home at Colbourne Spinneys, and I don't think she'll be fit to ride again this season. Old Harrison had tears in his eyes when he saw her!"

"Harrison is an old woman about horses! I never touched Meg with the spurs. She was as fresh as paint, and there was no holding her."

"You can't deceive me or yourself," Lady May continued calmly. "You have been riding for a fall, all day, and you may think yourself pretty fortunate that you haven't a broken neck. It seemed as though you

were trying for one. And now that you haven't succeeded, you have nearly ridden ten miles alone with me, and scarcely opened your mouth. You are very provoking, Mr. de Vaux. I wish I had ridden home with Captain Fellowes."

He was on the point of reminding her that the arrangement had not been of his making, but he checked himself. After all, Lady May had some grounds for her irritation. They had been friends since they had been children, and Paul knew that every one expected him, someday, to ask Lady May to become the mistress of Vaux Abbey. There had been a little more than intimacy even in their friendship up till twelve months ago ; and Paul had certain recollections of their last interview, which had made him more than once a trifle uneasy. As a matter of fact, Lady May had quite made up her mind that Paul de Vaux would certainly ask her to marry him some time ; and she had, on his account, refused two very eligible offers. Their people desired it, and, in her heart, Lady May was conscious that Paul was a little more to her than any other man could be. So she felt herself at first, aggrieved by his long silence during their ride home, which, to tell the truth, she had carefully planned for, and afterwards was just on the verge of being seriously offended.

"Don't be angry with me, please," he said quietly.

"You are right; something is the matter. I am worried."

She was sympathetic and kindly at once. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me for bothering you. You used to tell me your troubles once! Are we too old now?"

He shook his head. "I hope we never shall be," he said. "I can't tell you all, but one thing is this. I had a letter from a man in town to-day—a man whom I can trust—about Arthur. You know what an impressionable, sensitive boy he is. Anyone who once obtains an influence over him can do nearly what they like with him. He seems—so my correspondent tells me—to have become completely fascinated with a—a—dancer—Adrea Kiros I think she calls herself."

"I have heard of her," Lady May murmured. "She dances only at private houses, I think. Everyone says she is wonderful."

"She is—wonderful," Paul said slowly. He was about to say more, but he checked himself. Lady May was watching him, and he knew that he could not speak of Adrea Kiros unmoved. So he went on:—

"I am not complaining, for after all it is perfectly natural, but Arthur is certainly his mother's favorite son. You know how strict she is in some of her notions; so you can understand what a shock it would be

to her if any rumors were to reach her ears. It would be a terrible blow to her. But, apart from that, the thing is serious in itself. Arthur was always delicate, and Cis—my friend—speaks of him as looking ghastly ill. The girl is probably only amusing herself, although she seems to have given him plenty of encouragement. But I know Ad—Adrea Kiros. She is no ordinary girl of her class. In the whole world I doubt if there breathes a more dangerous woman," he wound up, in a low tone.

Lady May was quite sympathetic now, but a little mystified. "I am so sorry," she said softly. "Ought you not to go to London, and try what your influence can do with him? That is disinterested advice, at any rate," she added, with a little laugh, "for I don't want you to go. But Arthur always seemed to look up to you so! You might be able to get him away. Don't you think it would be a good thing if you could get him down here? We would make it as lively as possible for him up at the Castle; and, I don't know how your preserves are, but ours have been scarcely touched yet. Between the two of us, at any rate, he could have as much shooting as he liked. And I would ask the Fergusson girls to come and stay," she went on, getting more and more in love with her plan. "He was so much taken with Amy, you know, when

they were down here before. We could get up some theatricals, or something, and have quite a good time. What do you think of my plan?"

He was thankful for her long speech, for it had enabled him to get over the slight agitation which the thought of that unavoidable journey to London had called up in him. From the first he had felt that it was his duty to go. He had received this disquieting letter two days ago, and since then he had telegraphed twice, and written to Arthur without getting any reply. Yes, he must go. And mingled with that reluctance and nameless apprehension which he felt at the thought of returning into her neighbourhood, he was acutely conscious, all the time, of a certain vague but sweet pleasure at the thought that fate had so ordained it. Perhaps it would be necessary for him to see her! A thrill of pleasure passed through him at the thought, followed almost immediately by a reaction of keen and bitter disgust with himself. He set his teeth, and quite unconsciously dug his spurs into his horse's sides, with the natural result that she reared up, almost unseating him, and then plunged forward. He had to gallop her along the road for a few hundred yards, and then turned round and rejoined Lady May. Fortunately she had not seen the commencement of the little episode.

"Whatever was the matter?" she asked.

"I fancy my spurs must have pricked her," he said apologetically. "I was riding quite carelessly."

"Well, please don't let it happen again," she begged, eyeing his mare's flanks suspiciously. "Dandy is very tired now, and is generally good tempered; but I don't think he would stand much of that sort of thing."

"I'm really very sorry," he said.

She nodded. "All right. And now, what do you think of my plan? Are you going to London?"

"I think your plan is a very good one indeed, and I shall run up to town to-morrow," he said. "It is very good of you to be so interested."

He looked down into her face, a fair, sweet face it was, and then glanced away over the bare moorland which stretched on one side of them. It was a late November afternoon, and a faint yellow light was lingering in the west, where the sun had just set, colouring the clouds which stretched across the sky in long, level streaks. A fresh, healthy breeze, strong with the perfume of the sea, blew in their teeth, and afar off they could hear the waves dashing against the iron-bound line of northern cliffs. Inland, the country was more cultivated, but hilly and broken up with masses of lichen-covered rock, and little clumps of thin fir trees. He knew the scenery so well. The rugged,

barren country, with its great stretches of moorland and little patches of cultivated land, with its silent tarns, its desolation, and the ever-varying music of the sea, they all meant home to him, and he loved them. It had always been so, and yet he felt it at that moment as he had never felt it before. The prospect of that journey to London was suddenly loathsome to him. The clear, physical healthfulness of his North-country home was triumphant, for the moment, over that other passion, which seemed to him then weak and artificial. It seemed to him also, looking down into Lady May's fresh, thoughtful face, that she was somehow in accord with these surroundings,—that she was, indeed, the link, the safeguard which should bind him to them, the good influence which should keep him fit to breathe God's pure air, and to keep himself, as he had ever striven to, *sans peur et sans reproche.* Paul was no sentimentalist, in the idle and common sense of the word. In his attitude to every-day life, he was essentially practical, sometimes perhaps a little too practical. But he was capable of strong feeling, and it came then with a rush. He leant over towards Lady May, and laid his hand upon her saddle.

"You are very kind and sympathetic," he said softly. "You are always kind."

She looked up at him, pleased, and with a soft look

in her deep grey eyes. "You do not give me very much opportunity," she said quietly. "At one time you used to tell me all your troubles; do you remember?"

"Yes! I remember," he answered, almost in a whisper, for they were riding up a grass-grown avenue,—a back way to the Abbey,—and their horses' hoofs sank noiselessly into the soft turf. "Sometimes I have dared to hope that those days may come again."

She was silent, and her head was turned away lest he might see the tears trembling in her eyes. So they rode on for a moment or two, walking their horses in the dim twilight; she in the shadow of the grey wall and the overhanging trees, and he very close to her, with his hand still upon her saddle and his reins loose in his hand.

"If ever they did, if ever I was so fortunate," he went on in a low tone, "you would find your office no sinecure. I have troubles, or rather, one trouble, and a great one, May."

She looked at him for a moment, her eyes full of sympathy. She dimly remembered the time when strange stories were current in the county of Martin de Vaux, and their echo had remained for years. It was not for her to inquire about them, and she never had done so. But that their burden should have fallen

upon Paul; it was hard! Her heart was sore with the injustice of it. A woman is a swift and censorious judge of any one who brings trouble upon the man she loves.

He was a little closer to her still; and suddenly the hand which carried her small whip felt itself grasped in strong fingers and held tightly.

"May——"

It was not his fault this time that his mare stood still, and then ran backwards, dislodging the topmost stones from the grey stone wall with her hind quarters, and then plunging violently. This time there was cause for her alarm. A tall, forbidding-looking figure stood in the middle of the avenue, grasping the rein of Lady May's terrified horse. He had come out of the twilight so suddenly, and his attire was so unusual, that Paul and Lady May were almost as surprised as the animals. Paul's first instinct was one of anger.

"What the——"

He stopped short. The man who had startled them so had quieted Lady May's horse with a few soothing words, and now stood out of the deep shade of the overhanging trees into the centre of the avenue. Even here his face was scarcely visible, but his figure and attire were sufficient. He wore the long robes and shovel hat of a Roman Catholic priest.

Paul broke off in the middle of his exclamation, and the arm which had been grasping his whip tightly sank nervelessly to his side. He was thankful for the twilight, which concealed the grey shade which had stolen into his face. Yet now that the blow had fallen, he was calmer than he had been in some of his anticipations of it. For it had indeed fallen! In the dusky twilight he had recognised the face of the priest, changed though it was. He rode up, and addressed him.

"Have you lost your way?" he asked quietly. "This is a private road, and the gate at the other end is locked."

The priest looked at him steadily for a moment, and then drew on one side, as though to let them pass.

"I am sorry that I startled your horses," he said, in a soft, pleasant voice, marked with a strong foreign accent; "I was standing with my back to you, waiting for the moon to rise behind the ruins there, and the soft ground made your approach noiseless. And, if I am trespassing, I am sorry. The steward at the Abbey yonder gave me permission to wander anywhere around the ruins. I have perhaps exceeded a little his bounds."

"It is of no consequence," Paul said. "You find the ruins interesting, then?"

"Very."

"There are some pictures in the Abbey you might care to see—mostly modern, but there is a Rubens and two Giorgiones."

The priest removed his hat. "I thank you, but I am only interested in ecclesiastical art. These ruins are more to me than any pictures—save those which Rome alone possesses," he added. "I spend all my evenings here, and hope to be allowed to, for the short time that I remain in the neighbourhood."

"You have my permission to come and go as you please. I am Mr. de Vaux," Paul said, touching his horse with the whip. "Good-evening!"

"Good-evening, sir! Good-evening, madam! I thank you!"

They rode on down the avenue, Paul silent and absorbed, and making no attempt to pursue the conversation. At the bend of the lane he turned round in his saddle. The priest was standing with his back to them, motionless and silent as a figure of stone.

## CHAPTER VII

### "WHO ARE YOU, AND WHAT YOUR MISSION?"

The winter moon, soft and bright and full, looked down upon the ruins of Vaux Abbey. A strange beauty lay upon the bare, rock-strewn hillside and desolate moor. Afar off a grey, brawling stream was touched by its light, and in its place a band of gold seemed coiled around the grey, sleeping hill. A black, reed-grown tarn at the foot of the Abbey gleamed and quivered like a fair silver shield. The dark pines which crowned their sandy slopes lost their forbidding frown in an unaccustomed softness, and every harsh line and broken pillar of the ruined chapel was toned down into a rich, sad softness. A human face, too, uplifted to the sky, so silent and motionless that it seemed almost set into the side of one of those groined arches, had lost all its harshness and worldliness in the glow of that falling light. It might have been the face of a saint, save for the vague unhappiness which shone in the clear, dark eyes; for at that moment, spirituality, wistfulness, and reverence seemed carved into the

white, still features. But there was disquiet, too; and, after a while, as though some cloud had passed across the moon, a dark shade stole into the white face. The brows were contracted into a frown, and the eyes filled with restless doubt. Father Adrian moved away from the shadow of the pillar, and stood, tall and motionless, on the ruined chapel floor, with his eyes fixed upon the distant landscape. After a moment or two, his lips began to move and he commenced to speak aloud in a low, deep tone.

"Six nights has my voice gone up to God from amongst these silent ruins, six nights I have prayed in vain. These fair, still evenings mock me! Whose is their beauty, if it be not God's; and, if there be a God, and if the Blessed Virgin, our Holy Mother, indeed dwells amongst the stars, why are their faces turned from me? Oh! that man knew a little more or a little less—enough to pierce the mystery of yon star-crowned heavens, or so little as to gaze on them unmoved and unfeeling! What is our little knowledge? A mockery, a dreary, hopeless mockery! I had better have rotted in that miserable monastery, a soulless, lifeless being, than have stepped out to struggle with a world which is only a terrible riddle to me. I cannot reason with it; I cannot laugh or weep with it; I am in it, but not of it! Why was I sent? Oh! why was I sent?"

The snapping of a twig caused him to turn suddenly round. Paul de Vaux was advancing through the ruins, with a loose cloak thrown over his evening clothes.

Father Adrian turned round to meet him. The two men stood for a moment face to face without speaking. Both recognised that this interview was to be no ordinary one; and in a certain sense, each seemed to be measuring the other's strength. It was Paul who spoke first.

"We have met before, Father Adrian."

"Yes."

"You will scarcely wonder that I am surprised to see you here in England. Have you left the monastery at Cruta?"

"I left it a month after you did."

"But your vows,—were they not for life?" Paul asked.

Father Adrian smiled scornfully. "I was not bound to Cruta," he answered. "There had been complaints, and I was there to investigate them. The monastery was poverty and disease-stricken. It is closed now forever."

"Then you are no monk?"

Father Adrian shook his head. "I am, and I am not. In my youth I served my novitiate, but I never

took the oaths. The cloisters are for holier men than I."

"Then who are you?"

"I am—Father Adrian, priest of the Roman Catholic Church, I can tell you no more."

The moonlight was falling full upon his dark, striking face. Paul, with bent brows, scanned every feature of it intently. Father Adrian bore the scrutiny without flinching and without discomposure. Only once the colour mounted a little into his cheeks as the eyes of the two men met.

"What brings you to Vaux Abbey, Father Adrian?" Paul asked at length.

"To see your home," was the quiet reply.

"What do you want with me? It must be something more than curiosity which has brought you all this way. What is it?"

Father Adrian was silent. Yet his silence was not one of confusion. He was looking down through the gaps in the ruined chapel walls at the dark Gothic front of the old Abbey. Paul waited for an answer, and it came at last.

"I wished to see the home of Martin de Vaux, the Englishman who died in my arms at the monastery of Cruta. For six nights I have prayed for his soul in Purgatory, amongst the ruins here. He died in grievous sin!"

"Have you come to remind me of it?" Paul asked bitterly. "Perhaps you have repented of your silence, and have come to break the widow's heart by telling her the story of his last moments. Perhaps—perhaps in those dark hours he told you his secret—told you why he had come to Cruta!"

"He did," said the priest gravely.

"My God!"

It was a great shock to Paul. Hitherto he had feared only one thing: that the story of his father's tragical death might come to light, and break his mother's heart. Now there was more to fear,—far more. He looked into Father Adrian's face with a new and keener interest. He recognised at once that everything dear to him in life might be at this man's mercy.

"You were intrusted with this secret by a dying man," Paul said, with a little hoarseness in his tone. "It is to you as the secrets of the confessional!"

The priest shook his head gently. "He refused to confess. He told me distinctly that it was as man to man he spoke to me."

Paul looked away into the night with white, stricken face, and cursed his father's weakness. Supposing that this priest had discovered that his conscience would not allow him to keep the secret! What more

likely! Why else was he here,—why else did he disclaim the confessional? There was only one other alternative! Perhaps he desired to trade upon his secret. Yet how was that possible? Of what use could money be to him? What could he gain by it? Besides, his was not the face of an adventurer.

"I do not understand," Paul said at last. "Once more let me ask you, Father Adrian, why are you here?"

Father Adrian looked thoughtfully away. "You ask more than I can tell you," he said gravely. "The time has not yet come. We shall meet again. Farewell!"

The priest turned away, but Paul laid his hand on his shoulder.

"If there is anything which you ought or mean to tell me, tell me now," he demanded hoarsely. "I can bear everything but suspense. I know only—that there was a secret. No more. Proceed! Tell me more!"

The priest shook his robe free from Paul's restraining hand, and turned away.

"Not yet! Not yet! My mind is not yet clear. We shall meet again. Farewell!"

"But——"

"Farewell!"

The priest had passed from the ruins, and was already out of sight in the gathering darkness.

"Come back, Father Adrian! One word more!"

"Farewell!"

The priest did not turn his head. Paul was left alone, gazing after him with stern, troubled face and anxious heart. It was a danger which he had always foreseen, always dreaded. Henceforth he must live like a man who paces, day by day, the brink of a volcano. At any moment the blow might fall.

## CHAPTER VIII

### "I AM WEARY OF A HOPELESS LOVE"

PAUL and Arthur shared a bachelor residence in Mayfair; shared it, that is to say, insomuch as Paul had purchased it, and was the sole proprietor, and Arthur used it whenever he could get leave from his regiment. It was here Paul found his brother on the morning of his arrival in London.

They shook hands in silence; Paul did not wish to say anything for a moment. His brother's appearance had choked him. It was one o'clock, but he was still in his dressing-gown; with sunken, pale cheeks, save for one bright spot, and with faint, dark rims underneath his eyes. There were a pile of blue papers and some ominous-looking envelopes on the table before him, and Paul could not help noticing the intense pallor of the hand which rested upon them.

"I wish you would let a fellow know what time you were coming," Arthur said, rather peevishly, but with an attempt at a smile. "I didn't expect you till evening, so I was having a shack before dressing. I was late last night!"

Paul banished his gravity, as far as possible, and stood with his hands in his pockets, leaning against the mantel-piece. He heartily disliked the part of mentor, and he did not wish to play it, unless he were obliged.

"It was beastly early to get up," he said, "but the connection at Normanton is so much better. One has to wait two hours by the late train, and Normanton is such a hole. I don't know that I should have come up to town at all, just yet," he continued after a slight pause, "only that I'm on the committee at the club this term, you know, and I haven't attended a single meeting yet. Besides, I promised Westover to put him up this time, and the half-yearly meeting's to-morrow, you know. Got any engagement? If not, you might dine with me there. Always a full night election time, you know!"

"Beastly sorry! but my leave's up to night," Arthur answered ruefully. "I shall have to go down to Aldershot by the four o'clock train, and do a week's close grind."

Paul nodded. "I'm sorry; I'd have liked you to run down home with me for a few days, and see the mater. The Westovers have some very nice people coming to the Castle, and are going to get up some theatricals. Lady May says they must have you! Will you come in a week, if I work the Colonel?"

"I'm afraid I can't," Arthur answered, with a slight flush in his cheeks. "I have some engagements for next week, and—and—I'm sure I can't manage it."

"The mater'll be disappointed," Paul said quietly. "She is counting on seeing you, and it's some time since you were down, isn't it? Tell you what, old man! I'd try and manage it, if I were you!"

"I can't promise! I will, if I can manage it! I'll write you from Aldershot!"

"You don't look quite the thing," Paul said kindly. "Nothing the matter, is there?"

"Nothing at all," Arthur assured him hastily. "I'm quite well. A bit of a head, that's all."

"Not too many of those bits of paper about, eh?" Paul asked, pointing to an oblong strip of blue paper which lay, face uppermost, on the table.

Arthur coloured, and threw a book over it.

"I am sorry I saw it," Paul went on;" but it was there to be seen, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes! that's all right! I oughtn't to have left it about, that's all. I'm not exactly a Crœsus, like you, you know, Paul, and now and then I'm obliged to raise the wind somehow. Yes! I know what you're going to say. My allowance is a good one, and I ought to make it do. But, you see, sometimes I can't."

"I hope you won't mind my asking, Arthur, but is that an acceptance of your own?"

Arthur nodded. "There are a few accounts which I must pay," he said. "So I'm going to ask Plimsoll to do it for me. He's a decent fellow of his sort, you know! Lots of fellows go to him!"

Paul stretched out his hand. "Give it to me," he said, "and I will discount it for you. Thanks!"

Paul took it, and, just glancing at the amount, threw it into the fire. "I haven't my cheque book here," he said, "but we will call at the bank on our way to the club, and I can get the money. I'm glad I saw it!"

"It's awfully good of you," Arthur said hesitatingly. "I shouldn't have thought of asking you. I must owe you an awful lot already."

"Never mind what you owe me! I'll write it all off, Arthur, and this last amount too, if you'll do me a favour. Come down home with me next week, as soon as you can get leave."

Arthur rose to his feet, and then, leaning against the mantel-board, buried his face in his hands. "I can't leave London, Paul!—or, if I did, it could only be for a day," he said in a low tone. "I wish I could tell you why, but I can't; you wouldn't understand!"

"I think I know," Paul said quietly. "There is some one whom you do not care to leave! Is that not it?"

Arthur looked up quickly. His face was very white, and his lip was quivering.

"Who told you that? What do you know?"

"I know nothing! I want you to tell me. Perhaps I could help you. There is a—lady in the case, isn't there?"

Arthur stood up on the hearthrug, and spoke, with a subdued passion trembling in his tone.

"Yes! it's Adrea Kiros, the dancer! I daresay you've heard all about it! I don't see why you shouldn't! I can't leave her! I know all that you would say! It doesn't make any difference. She isn't good! Well! I know it! She doesn't care for me! I don't believe she does. She's as cruel as a woman can be. Sometimes, when I am away from her, the thought of going back makes me shudder; and yet, I could no more keep away than lift the roof from this house. Of course, this sounds like rigmarole to you. You think I'm raving! I don't blame you. Only it is so, and I can't help it! I am as much a prisoner as any poor devil in Newgate."

Paul laid his hand upon his brother's shoulder, and looked kindly into his face. "Arthur, I'm very sorry! And don't think I don't understand! I do! I do not know much of A— of Adrea Kiros, but I know enough to tell me that she is a very dangerous woman. Can't I help you, somehow?"

"I—I don't think you can! I don't think any one can," Arthur exclaimed unsteadily. He had been prepared for a lecture, for good advice, for a little contempt even; but his brother's attitude was unexpected, and it almost unnerved him. "It is the uncertainty of it all that is so tormenting," he went on. "Sometimes she is so kind, and sweet, and thoughtful, that I could almost worship her. And then, without any cause, she will suddenly become cold, and hard, and cruel, till I hate myself for bearing quietly all that she says. But I do! I can't help it! I am never quite happy even when she is in one of her sweetest moods, for I never know how long it will last. The moment I leave her I begin to get anxious, and wonder how she will be the next day."

"Try what a change will do, Arthur!" his brother begged.

Arthur shook his head. "It's no use; I've tried! If I went away I should only be miserable, and hurry back by the first train. Oh, if only I could make you understand!" he cried, with a little passionate gesture, which gained pathos and almost dignity from the expression on his white, sorrowing face. "Adrea is as necessary to me as the air we breathe! The sun has no light, and the day no ending, till I have seen her! She is the measure of all things to me: joy,

grief, happiness, misery, it is her hand that deals them out to me! She can play upon the chords of my being as she chooses. A look or word from her can pull me down into hell, or transport me into a seventh heaven! Who gave her this power, I cannot tell! But she has it! she has it!"

Paul said no more. Perhaps he recognised that, for the present at any rate, it was useless. He walked up and down the room for a few minutes, in sympathetic silence. When he spoke again he made no reference to the subject, but Arthur understood. "Get your things on, and come out to lunch with me," he said pleasantly. "I am too hungry to be sympathetic, and we can call at Coutts' on the way."

Arthur nodded and disappeared. Paul took his chair for a while, and, as he sat there gazing into the fire, his face grew grey and haggard. Was Adrea Kiros seeking vengeance on the son of her father's murderer? he wondered. If so, it seemed as though she were indeed succeeding. How could he save Arthur? and what would happen if those rumours should reach his mother's ears, as some day they certainly would? At any rate, he would see Adrea himself before he left London. He had made up his mind that, if Arthur refused to listen to him, that should be his course.

Things somehow seemed brighter when they walked down to the club together. Dress makes so much difference to a man, and Arthur, spruce and *debonair*, with a gardenia in his button-hole, and every part of his attire almost "faultily faultless," according to the canons of London fashion, presented a very different appearance to the tragical-looking personage of half an hour ago. There was a slight air of subdued feverishness about him, though, not altogether healthy, and the dark rims had not quite vanished from underneath his eyes.

"Paul, I wonder whether you will do something for me?" he asked, as they were crossing Pickadilly. "I hate asking you!"

"I'll try," Paul answered. "What is it?"

"I don't believe you'll like it, but—the fact is, Adrea wants you to go and see her. I promised that I would do my best to get you to call with me this afternoon. If you don't mind, I wish you would," he added wistfully.

"I will go with you certainly, if you wish it," Paul answered, not too cordially, for he did not wish his brother to know that it was what he had already planned to do. "Did she tell you that we had already a slight acquaintance?"

"Yes! You rode home in a cab together from Lady

Swindon's, didn't you? There was only one, and it was raining, so you shared it. Adrea told me that."

Paul nodded. He meant, after he had seen Adrea, to consider whether it would not be best to tell his brother everything. But, for the present, her story was enough. They turned into Pall Mall, and, almost immediately, Arthur's hat was in his hand, and he was on the edge of the pavement, colouring with pleasure. A small victoria had pulled up by the side, and Paul found himself face to face with Adrea.

She was muffled up in rich brown furs, and almost invisible, but her dark eyes flashed into his from underneath her thick veil. After the first greeting she scarcely noticed Arthur; it was Paul upon whom her eyes were bent.

"You are in London again, then, Mr. de Vaux," she remarked. "Have you discovered that, after all, the country is a little *triste* in this land of damp and fogs —the country in November, I mean—or is it only important business which has brought you up!"

"The latter," he answered, "as it happens. I am glad to see that the damp and fogs which you complain of have not affected your health."

"I am quite well, thanks," she answered. "How long are you staying in town?"

"For less than a week, I think."

"Well, it is too cold to talk here. Will you come and let me give you some tea this afternoon, after the fashion of you strange islanders? I want you to, please."

Paul looked her straight in the face. "You are very kind; I shall be glad to," he answered.

She nodded. "About five o'clock. I go to sleep till then. Shall you come, Arthur?" she added carelessly.

"I cannot, so late as that," he answered despondently.

"Ah, I forgot. You are going down to Aldershot, aren't you? Don't overwork yourself."

She nodded, and the carriage drove on. Arthur watched it until it was out of sight. "She might have said a little earlier," he remarked despondently. "She knew I couldn't come so late as that."

Paul passed his arm through his brother's and was silent. He knew very well that Adrea had thought of this when she had made the arrangement.

They lunched together, and Paul did his utmost to make the time pass pleasantly for his brother. When they parted, too, late in the afternoon, he referred once more to Mrs. de Vaux's desire that he should come down to the Abbey for a few days.

"I want you to think of it seriously, Arthur," he

said, as they shook hands through the carriage window. "The mother is very anxious to have you, and I am sure we can make things pleasant for you. I shall speak to Drummond about leave if I see him tomorrow."

Arthur assented dubiously, and without any enthusiasm.

"Awfully good of you to want me," he remarked. "I daresay I'll be able to come. I'll try, anyhow—just for a day or two."

The train steamed off, and Paul walked slowly back to his carriage.

"Where to, sir?" the man asked.

Paul hesitated for a moment. Then he gave Adrea's address, and was driven away.

## CHAPTER IX

### "AH! HOW FAIR MY WEAKNESS FINDS THEE"

PAUL found no one in the hall of the house where Adrea lived to take him to her, so after waiting a few minutes for her maid, whom the porter had twice fruitlessly summoned, he ascended the stairs alone, and knocked at the door of her rooms.

At first there was no reply. He tried again a little louder, and this time there was a sound of some one stirring within.

"Come in, Celeste," was the drowsy answer.

He turned the handle and walked in, carefully closing the door behind him. At first the room appeared to be in semi-darkness, for a clear spring day's sunshine was brightening the streets which he had just left, and here the heavy curtains were closely drawn, as though to keep out every vestige of daylight. But gradually his eyes grew accustomed to the shaded twilight and he could make out the familiar objects of the room; for although it was only his second visit, they were familiar already in his thoughts.

Strangely enough it seemed to him, after his first hasty glance around, that the room was empty; but just then a sudden gleam from the bright fire fell upon Adrea's hair, and he saw her. He stood for a moment silent and motionless. She was curled up on a huge divan drawn close to the fireplace, with her limbs doubled under her like a panther's, and her arms, from which the loose sleeves had fallen back, clasped half-bare underneath her head. The peculiar grace of movement and carriage, which had made her dancing so famous, was even more striking in repose, for there was a faint, insidious suggestion of voluptuous movement in those motionless, crouching limbs, and the *abandon* of the shapely, dusky head, with its crown of dark, wavy hair thrown back amongst the cushions. It was beauty of a strange sort, the beauty almost of some wild animal; but Paul felt a most unwilling admiration steal through his senses as he gazed down upon her. Her tea-gown, a wonderful shade of shimmering green, tumbled and disarranged out of all similitude to its original shape, followed the soft perfections of her outline with such peculiar faithfulness that it seemed to suggest even more than it concealed, leaving the gentle tracery of her figure outlined there like a piece of living Greek statuary. She turned slightly upon the couch, and a slipperless little foot

stole out from a sea of lace and white draperies which her uneasy movement had left exposed, and swayed slowly backwards and forwards, trying to reach the ground. Her eyes were still closed, but she was not sleeping, for in a moment or two she spoke in a low, drowsy tone.

"Celeste, I told you not to disturb me for an hour. It isn't five o'clock yet, is it?"

He roused himself, and moved a step further into the room. "It is still a quarter to five, I think," he said. "I have come before my time."

She opened her eyes, and then, seeing him, sprang into a sitting posture. Her hair, which had escaped all bounds, was down to her shoulders, and her gown, still further disarranged by her hasty movement, floated around her in wonderful curves and angles. Had she been a past mistress in the art of picturesque effects she could have conceived nothing more striking. Paul felt all the old fear upon him as he watched the firelight gleaming upon her startled, dusky face, and the faint pink colouring, wonderfully suggestive of a blush, steal into her cheeks. It seemed to him that she was as beautiful as a woman could be, and yet so different from Lady May.

She rose, and, with a shrug of the shoulders and a quick, graceful movement, shook out her skirts, and

pushed the hair back from her face. Then she held out her hand, and Paul found himself compelled, against his will, to stand by her side.

"How strange that I should have overslept like this, and have taken you for Celeste!" she said. "Yet perhaps it was natural; for, Monsieur Paul, save Celeste, no one yet has permission to enter my chamber unannounced. How comes it that I find you here to laugh at my *deshabille*?"

He was silent for a moment, while she looked at him questioningly. Her soft, delicate voice, with its very slight but piquant foreign intonation, had often sounded in his reluctant yet charmed ears since their last meeting; but now that he heard it again he felt how weak were his imaginings, and what sweet music it indeed was.

"I am sorry," he answered; and the constraint which he was placing upon his voice made it sound hard and cold. "The porter rang for your maid twice whilst I waited in the hall; but as she did not come, I thought I had better try and find the way myself."

"And I mistook your knock for Celeste's, and let you discover me *comme cela*. Well, you were not to blame. See, I will just arrange my hair here, and you need not look at me unless you like."

She stood up in front of a mirror, over which she

lighted a shaded candle, and for a moment or two her white hands flashed deftly in and out amongst the dark, silky coils of disordered hair. Paul sat down, and taking up a magazine which he found lying on the divan, tried to concentrate his thoughts upon its contents. But he could not. Every moment he found his eyes and his thoughts straying to that slim, lithe figure, watching the play of her arms and the grace of her backward pose. When she looked suddenly round, on the completion of her task, their eyes met.

"Monsieur Paul, you are like all your sex—curious," she said lightly. "Tell me, then, do you admire my coiffure?"

"Very much," he answered, glancing at the loose Grecian knot into which she had gathered her disordered hair, and confined it with a band of dull gold. "It is quite oriental, and it seems to suit you. Not that I am any judge of such matters," he added quickly.

She moved away with a little, low laugh, and lit two or three more of the shaded candles or fairy lamps which were placed here and there on brackets round the room. Then she rang the bell, and gave some orders to the maid.

"So you think my hair looks oriental," she said, sinking down upon a huge cushion in front of the fire.

"That is what the papers call me sometimes—oriental. My early associations asserting themselves, you see. I think I remember more of Constantinople than any place," she went on dreamily, with her eyes fixed on the fire. "I was only a child in those days, but it seemed to me then that nothing could be more beautiful than the City of Mosques and the Golden Horn on a clear summer evening. Why do I think of those days?" she added, shaking her head impatiently. "Such folly! And yet I always think of them when I am lonely."

He was suddenly and deeply moved with altogether a new feeling towards her—one of responsibility. She was alone in the world, and it was his father's hand which had rendered her so. How empty and barren had been his conception of the burden which that deed had laid upon him! Like a flash he seemed to see the whole situation in a new light. If, indeed, she had drifted into ruin, the sin lay at his door. He should have found her a mother; it should have been his care to have watched her continually, and to have assured himself that she was contented and happy. In those few moments the whole situation seemed to change, and he even felt a hot flush of shame at his own coldness towards her. He forgot the dancer, the woman of strange fascinations, the idol of the *jeunesse dorée* of

West London clubdom, and he remembered only the fact that she was a lonely orphan with a most womanly light in her soft, dark eyes, and that he had failed in his duty towards her. Paul was essentially a "manly" man, self-contained, and with all his feelings very much at his control ; but at that moment he felt something like a rush of tenderness towards this strange, dark-eyed girl who lay coiled up at his feet. Involuntarily he stretched out his hand and laid it, with an almost caressing gesture, upon her hair.

She started around, as though electrified, and looking up saw the change in his face. It was the first kindly look or speech she had had from him since they had met in London, and it had come so suddenly that it seemed to have a strange effect upon her. A deep flush stole into her face, and her eyes gleamed brilliantly. She drew a long breath, and underneath her loose gown he could see her bosom rising and falling quickly. Yet it all seemed so softened and womanly that the thoughts which he had once had of her seemed like a distant nightmare to him. The ethical and physical horror of her being—of her ever becoming—what he feared, rose up strong within him, and deepened at once his sense of responsibility towards her, and his new-born tenderness. He took her hand gently, and was startled to find how cold it was.

"So you do feel lonely, Adrea, sometimes," he said softly, "although you have so many acquaintances."

The colour burned deeper for a moment in her cheeks. She looked at him half reproachfully, half indignantly.

"Acquaintances! You mean the people who come to see me! I hate them all! Sometimes they amuse me a little, but that is all. They are nothing!"

"And you have no women friends?"

"None! How should I! But I do not care. I do not like English-women!"

"But, Adrea, it is not good for you,—this isolation from your sex."

At the sound of her christian name, coming from his lips so gently, almost affectionately, she looked up quickly. It seemed to him almost as though some softening change had crept over her. Was it the firelight, he wondered, or was it fancy?

"Good for me!" she said softly. "Have you just thought of that, Monsieur Paul?"

Again he felt that pang of conscience; and yet, was she not a little unjust to him?

"You took your life into your own hands," he reminded her. "You chose for yourself."

"Yes, yes!" she answered, drawing a little nearer to him, till her head almost rested upon his knees. "I do not blame you."

"It would have been so easy before to have found a home for you," he went on, "and now you have made it so difficult."

"There is no need," she interrupted proudly; "I could keep myself now. I do not want anything from you, Monsier Paul,—save one thing!"

She raised her face to his, and it seemed to him to be all aglow with a wonderful, new light. There was no mistaking the soft entreaty of those strange, dark eyes so close to his, or the tremor in his tones. And then, before he could answer her, before he could summon up resolution enough to draw away, she had stolen softly into his arms, and, with a little murmur of content, had rested her small, dusky head, with its coronet of dark, braided hair, upon his shoulder, and twined her hands around his neck.

"Paul! Monsieur Paul! I am lonely and miserable. Love me just a little, only a little!" she pleaded.

It was the supreme moment for both of them. To her, coveting this love with all the passionate force of her fiery oriental nature, time seemed to stand still while she rested passively in his arms, neither altogether accepted nor altogether repulsed. And to him, as he sat there pale and shaken, fighting fiercely against this great temptation which threatened his self-respect, his liberty of body and soul, life seemed to

have turned into a grim farce, full of grotesque lights and shadows, mocking and gibing at all which had seemed to him sweet and pure and strong. Her warm breath fell upon his cheek, and her eyes maddened him. A curiously faint perfume from her clothes floated upon the air, and oppressed him with its peculiar richness. He was a strong man but at that moment he faltered. It seemed as though some unseen hand were weaving a spell upon him, as though his whole environment was being drawn in around him, and he himself were powerless. Yet, even in that moment of intoxication, his reason did not altogether desert him. He knew that if he opened his arms to receive that clinging figure, and drew the delicate, tear-stained face, full of mute invitation, down to his, to be covered with passionate kisses,—he knew that at that moment he would sign the death-warrant to all that had seemed fair and sweet and comely in his life. Forever he must live without self-respect, a dishonoured man in his own eyes, perhaps some day in hers,—for he had no more faith in her love than in his.

He held her hands tightly in his,—he had unwound them gently from his neck,—and stood up face to face with her upon the hearthrug. The soft fire-light threw up strange, ruddy gleams, which glowed around her and shown in her dark eyes, fixed so earnestly and so passionately upon his.

"Adrea," he said, and his low, hoarse tone sounded harsh and unfamiliar to his ears, "you do not know——"

She interrupted him, she threw her arms again around his neck, and her upturned face almost met his.

"I do know! I do know! I understand—everything! Only I—cannot live without you, Paul!"

Her head sank upon his shoulder; he could not thrust her away. Very gently he passed his arms around her, and drew her to him. He knew that he could trust himself. For him the battle was over. Even as she had crept into his arms, there had come to him a flash of memory—a sudden, swift vision. The walls of the dimly lit, dainty little chamber, with all its charm of faint perfume, soft lights, and luxurious drapings, had opened before him, and he looked out upon another world. A bare Northumbrian moor, with its tumbled masses of grey rock, its low-hanging, misty clouds and silent tarns, stretched away before his eyes. A strong, fresh breeze, salt-smelling and bracing, cooled his hot face. The roar of a great ocean thundered in his ears, and an angry sunset burned strange colours into the western sky. And with these actual memories came a healthier tone of feeling—something, indeed, of the old North-country puritanism which was in his blood. The sea spoke to him of the vastness of life, and dared him to cast his away, soiled

and tarnished, for the sake of a brief, passionate delight. The breeze, nature's very voice, whispered to him to stand true to himself, and taste once more and for ever the deep joy of pure and perfect communion with her. The voices of his past life spoke to him in one long, sweet chorus, and held up to him those ideals to which he had been ever true. And blended with all were memories, faint but sweet, of a fair womanly face, into whose clear grey eyes he could never dare to look again if he yielded now to this fierce temptation. A new strength came upon him, and brought with it a great tenderness.

"Adrea, my child," he said softly, "you make me almost forget that I am your guardian and you are my ward. Sit down here! I want to talk to you."

He led her, dumb and unresisting, to a chair, and stood by her side.

"Adrea——"

She interrupted him, throwing his arms roughly from her shoulder, and springing to her feet.

"How dare you touch me! How dare you stand there and mock me! Oh! how I hate you! hate you! hate you!

Her voice and every limb trembled with passion, and her face was as pale as death. Before her anger he bowed his head and was silent. Against the sombre

background of dark curtains, her slim form seemed to gain an added strength and dignity.

"You have insulted me, Paul de Vaux! Do I not owe you enough already, without putting this to the score! Dare you think that it was indeed my love I offered you—you who stood by and saw my father murdered that you might be spared from shame and disgrace! Bah! Listen to me and go! You have a brother? Good! I shall ruin him, shall break his heart; and, when the task is over, I shall cast him away like an old glove! Oh, it will be easy, never fear! I shall do it. Arthur is no cold hypocrite, like you. He is my slave. And when I have ruined him, have set my foot upon him, it will be your turn, Monsieur Paul de Vaux. Listen! I will know my father's secret! I will know why he was murdered! I will discover everything! Some day the whole world shall know—from me. Now go! Out of my sight, I say! Go! go! go!"

With bowed head and face as white as death Paul walked out of the room, with her words ringing in his ears like the mocking echoes of some hideous nightmare.

## CHAPTER X

"I AM BUT A SLAVE, AND YET I BID THEE COME"

"WERE there any letters for me this morning, mother?" Paul asked.

"Only one for you, I think," Mrs. de Vaux answered from across the tea-tray. "I believe you will find it in the library. Shall I send for it?"

Paul shook his head. "It will keep," he answered lightly. "I can get it on my way upstairs. Have we anything left to tell, Lady May?"

"I think not," Lady May replied, from the depths of an easy chair drawn up to the fire. "Altogether it has been a glorious day, and such a scent! I don't know when I have enjoyed anything so much."

"Nor I!" Paul answered heartily. "The going was superb, and that second fox took us over a grand stretch of country. Really, if it hadn't been for the walls here and there, we might have been in Leicestershire! May I have some more tea, mother?"

Mrs. de Vaux stretched out her hand for his cup, and

smiled gently at their enthusiasm. She had been a hunting woman all her life; and, though she seldom even drove to a meet now, she liked to have her son come in to afternoon tea with her, and talk over the run. Of late, too, he had seemed so pale and listless that she had been getting a little anxious. She had begun to fear that he must be out of health, or that the monotony of Vaux Abbey was wearying him, and that he would be leaving her again soon. But to-day she had watched him ride up the avenue, with Lady May, and it seemed to her that there was a change in his bearing—a change for the better; and, looking at him now, she was sure of it. A faint glow was in his cheeks, and his eyes were brighter. His manner, too, to Lady May pleased her more. He had ridden home with her; from their conversation, they seemed to have been together almost all day; and there seemed to be a spirit of *bon comeradie* between the two, as they talked over their doings, which certainly pointed to a good understanding. Altogether Mrs. de Vaux was pleased and hopeful.

And, indeed, she had reason to be, for his long day in the open country with Lady May had been like a strong, sweet tonic to Paul. For the first time since his return to Vaux Abbey he had felt that a time might come when he would be able to escape altogether

from those lingering, bitter-sweet memories which were all that remained to him now of Adrea. On the bare, windy moor, with the glow of physical exercise and excitement coursing through his veins, and Lady May's pleasant voice in his ears, that little scene in the rose-lit chamber seemed for a moment very far away. Adrea, with her soft, passion-lit eyes, and dusky, oriental face, her lithe, voluptuous figure and the faint perfumes of her rustling draperies, seemed less to him then than a short while ago he could have believed possible. He could not think of that scene without a shudder,—it had left its mark in a certain way for ever,—but it was not so constantly present to him. He knew that, for the first time, a woman had tempted him sorely. He knew, too, and he alone, how nearly he had yielded. His sudden passion, her strange Eastern beauty, and the fascination which it had exercised over him, together with the soft sensuousness of her surroundings, had formed a strong coalition, and to-day he recognised, for the first time, how much he owed his victory to the girl who was riding by his side. Even in those breathless moments of hesitation he had found time to consider that if he yielded to Adrea's pleading, he could never again take Lady May's hand, or meet her frank, open gaze. The pure healthfulness of life which had been so dear to him would be tainted

for ever. The moorland breezes of his northern home would never strike the same chords in his nature again. All these recollections had flashed across his mind at that critical moment, lending strength to resist and crush his passion. And to-day he had commenced to reap his reward. To-day he had tasted once more the sweets of these things, and found how dear they still were to him. He could still look into Lady May's fair, pure face unshamed, and find all the old pleasure in listening to her frank, girlish talk; and he could still bare his head to the sweeping winds, and lift his face to the sun and gaze with silent admiration at the faint, deepening colours in the western sky, as Lady May and he rode homeward across the moor in the late afternoon. All these joys would have been lost to him for ever,—these and many others. Adrea could never have repaid him for their loss.

So Paul, who had come home from London pale and silent, with the marks of a great struggle upon him, lay back in an arm chair and watched the firelight play upon Lady May's fair face with more than a passive interest. Mrs. de Vaux's cherished scheme had never been so near its accomplishment; for if she could have read Paul's thoughts she would have known that he was thinking of Lady May more tenderly than he had ever done before. Meeting his

steadfast, almost wistful, gaze, she became almost confused, and suddenly rising, she shook out the skirts of her riding habit, and took up her hat and whip.

"It has been such a delightful rest," she said, looking away from Paul and speaking to his mother. "I shall never forget how good that tea tasted! But I really must go, Mrs. de Vaux! My poor animal is quite done up, and I shall have to walk all the way home."

"I don't know whether I did right," Paul said, rising, "but I sent your groom straight on home with the mare, and ordered a brougham for you. She has had a long day, and I thought it would be more comfortable for you."

She flashed a grateful glance at him. "How thoughtful and how kind you are! Of course it will be nicer! I was beginning to feel a little selfish, too, for keeping Betty out of her stable so long."

"As a reward we will keep you a little longer," he remarked. "It is only six o'clock!"

She shook her head. "No I won't stop, thanks! There are some tiresome people coming to dine to-night, and I must go home. Good-bye, Lady de Vaux!"

Paul strolled down the hall with her and handed her into the carriage. For the first time in his life he

held her hand a little tighter and a little longer than was necessary.

"Shall you be at home to-morrow afternoon, Lady May?" he asked quietly.

She looked up at him for a moment, and then her eyes drooped, and her heart beat a little faster. She understood him.

"Yes!" she answered softly.

"I shall ride over then! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

He lingered on the doorstep for a minute, watching the carriage roll down the avenue. When it had disappeared, he turned back into the hall, and after a moment's hesitation, entered the library.

It was a large, sombre-looking apartment, scarcely ever entered by anyone save Paul. The bookcases reached only half-way up the walls, the upper portion of which was hung with oil portraits, selected from the picture gallery. At the lower end of the room the shelves had been built out at right angles to the wall, lined with books, and in one of the recesses so-formed—almost as large as an ordinary-sized chamber—Paul had his writing-table surrounded by his favourite volumes. It was a delightful little miniature library. Facing him, six rows of black oak shelves held a fine collection of classical

literature; on his left, the lower shelves contained rare editions of the early English dramatists, and the upper ones were given up to poetry, from Chaucer to Swinburne. The right-hand shelves were wholly French, from quaint volumes of troubadours' poetry to Alfred de Musset and De Maupassant. It was here Paul spent most of his time when at the Abbey.

The meet had been rather a long way off that morning, and he had left before the arrival of the post-bag from the neighbouring town. Mrs. de Vaux had distributed the letters, and the one she had spoken of lay at the edge of the table. He stretched out his hand to take it up—without any presentiments, without any thought as to whom it might be from. An invitation, doubtless, or a begging letter he imagined, as he caught sight of the large square envelope. But suddenly, before his fingers had closed upon it, he started and stood quite still, leaning over the back of his chair. His heart was beating fast, and there was a mist before his eyes—a mist through which he saw, as though in a dream, the walls of his library melt away, to be replaced by the dainty interior of that little room in Grey Street, with all the dim luxury of its soft colouring and adornment. He saw her too, the centre of the picture—saw her as she seemed to him before that final scene—saw her

half-kneeling, half-crouching, before him, with her beautiful dark eyes, yearning and passionate, fixed upon his in mute, but wonderfully eloquent, pleading. Oh! it was folly, but it was sweet, marvellously sweet. Every nerve seemed thrilled with the exquisite pleasure of the memory so suddenly called up to him, and his lips quivered with the thought of what he might have said to her. The strange, voluptuous perfume which crept upwards from that letter seemed in a measure to have paralysed him. He stood there like a man entranced, with the dim firelight on one side and the low horned moon through the high window on his left, casting a strange, vivid light on his pale face—paler even than usual against the scarlet of his hunting-coat. That letter! What could it contain? Was it a recall, or a fresh torrent of anger? He stood there quite still, leaning over the back of the high-backed oak chair emblazoned with the De Vaux arms, and making no motion towards taking it up.

A sound from outside—the low rumbling of a gong—roused him at last, and he pushed the chair hastily away from him. His first impulse was one of anger, of shame, that he, a strong man, as he had deemed himself, should have been so moved by a simple flood of memories. It seemed ignoble to him

and a frown gathered on his forehead as he reached forward and picked up the letter. Yet his fingers trembled as they tore it open, and his eyes ran over the contents rapidly.

"18 Grey Street, London, W., *Thursday.*

"Monsieur Paul, my hand trembles a little when I sit down to write to you, and think of our last parting. But write to you I must! I am very humble now, and very, very much ashamed! Shall I go on and say that I am very sad and lonely,—for it is so! I am miserable! I I have been miserable every moment since that day! Forgive me, Monsieur Paul, forgive me! my guardian. I behaved quite dreadfully, and I deserved to be punished. Believe me! I am punished. I have had scarcely any sleep, and my eyes are swollen with weeping. I have cancelled all my engagements this week, and I have closed my doors to everybody. Oh! be generous, Monsieur Paul! be generous and forgive me! I have suffered so much,—it is right that I should, for I was much to blame. Will you not let fall some kindly veil of memory over that afternoon. I was mad. Let what I said be unsaid! Let me be again just what you called me,—your ward. I ask for nothing more! Be cold, if you will, and stern! Scold me! and I will but say that I have deserved it! Only come to me! Come and

let me hear your own lips tell me that I am forgiven. I will do everything that you ask! I will not see Arthur if he calls,—you shall tell me yourself how to answer his letters,—I have a little pile of them here. Monsieur Paul, you must come! You must come, or I shall be driven to—but no! I will not threaten. You would not care whatever happened to me, would you? I am very, very lonely. I wish that I could have telegraphed all this, and had you here to-night! But you would not have come! Yet, perhaps you would, out of kindness to a solitary girl. I like to think that you would have!

"Monsieur Paul, you have been good to the 'little brown girl,' as you used to call her, all your life! Do not forsake her now. She has been very mad and wicked, but she is very, very penitent. Celeste tells me that I am looking thin and ill, and my looking-glass says the same. It is because I am unhappy; it is because my guardian is angry with me, and he is so far away. Oh! Monsieur Paul, come, come, come to me! It shall be all as you wish! I will obey you in everything. Only forgive!

"Yours,

"ADREA."

## CHAPTER XI

### ADREA'S DIARY

"A figure from the past I see once more as in a dream."

THIS evening I have had an adventure! I am thankful, for it has occupied my thoughts for awhile; and for anything that does that I am grateful. I had been in the house all day, restless and nervous, and towards dusk I put on my cloak and a thick veil, and went out into the street. I scarcely noticed which way I went. It was all the same to me. A dull purple bank of clouds hung low down in the west, and the air was close and still. By-and-by I heard thunder, and big raindrops fell upon the pavement. A storm was threatening, and I longed for it to come and clear the air.

I must have been walking for nearly an hour, when it came at last, and the rain fell in great sheets. I looked around for a cab, but there was none in sight. I had no idea where I was,—London is so vast and large,—and though, by the distant roar of wheels, I could tell that I was not far from a great thoroughfare, the street in which I was seemed to be deserted. Just by my side was a dark tunnel, gloomy and vault-like

in appearance; but in that downpour any refuge was welcome, and I stepped back underneath it. It was like going into the bowels of the earth; and, every now and then, there was a roar over my head which made me almost dizzy. But, from round the corner, I could see that it was only the sound of trains passing and repassing, so I decided to stay until I could see a cab.

Opposite to me was a man with a truck-load of oranges, and by his side a boy seated before a red-hot swinging can, containing chestnuts. There was no one else in the street, although at the bottom of it crowds of people and a constant stream of vehicles were hurrying along. On the other side of the way was a tall and grim-looking building, discoloured with smoke and age. It was evidently a hospital or institution of some sort. The windows were long and narrow, and one or two of them, I could see, were of stained glass. There was no brass plate by the front door, nor any sign. In the absence of anything else to do, I began to frame surmises as to what the place might be. The spotlessly white doorsteps and polished bell interested me; they seemed out of tone with the character of the place and its surroundings, so utterly bare and dreary. I began to wish that a caller would come and ring the bell, so that I could get a peep at the interior. But no

one did, although I noticed that more than one hurrying passer-by glanced up at it curiously.

The thunder died away, but the rain still came down heavily. If it had not been for my curious interest in that great ugly building opposite, I should have risked a wetting, and made my way down to the busy thoroughfare in the distance. But I was anxious to see some one enter or leave the place, or for something to happen which would give me an idea as to its character; so I waited. Half an hour passed, and my curiosity remained unsatisfied. There was no sign of life about the place; not even a tradesman had called, nor had that forbidding-looking portal once been opened. It was still raining fast, but there were signs of finer weather, and right overhead was a break in the clouds. I should certainly be able to leave now in a few minutes; but, strangely enough, all my impatience seemed gone. The grim-looking building opposite had fascinated me. I had no desire to leave the place until I had found out all about it.

It was odd, that curiosity of mine; all my days I shall wonder at it. On the face of it, it seemed so unreasonable, and yet it led to so much. I have no creed, and I know nothing about philosophies, or perhaps to-night's adventure might have meant even more to me. But, indeed, it seems as though some unseen hand led

me out and brought me into that deserted street. From to-night there must be changes in my life; I cannot escape from them. As yet I am too much in a whirl to ask myself whether I wish to.

To return to that house. When I saw that the storm was clearing, and that I should be able to leave in a few minutes, I determined to make an effort to satisfy my curiosity. I crossed the road, and addressed the man who was sitting on the handles of his barrow of oranges.

"Do you know what place that is opposite?" I asked, pointing across the road.

He took out a filthy pipe from his mouth, and spat upon the pavement. I think that he must have noticed my look of disgust, for he answered me surlily, "No, I don't!"

I turned to the boy. "Do you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not for certain, maa'm. I believe it's some sort of a Roman Catholic place, though. Them gents in long clothes and shovel hats is allus going in and hout. 'Ullo, Bill! Here she be again! She's a-trying it on, ain't she?"

The man looked up and grunted. I followd the boy's glance, and saw a tall, dark woman walking swiftly along on the other side of the road. From the very first her figure was somehow familiar to me, and

She stopped outside the closed door, and hesitated for a moment, as though doubtful whether to ring or not. During her moment of hesitation she glanced round, and I recognised her. She could not see me, for I was in the shadow of the underground tunnel.

"Blarmed if she ain't come again," the man growled. "She's as regular as clockwork! Wonder what she wants!"

I felt my knees trembling; I could not have crossed the road at that moment if it had been to save my life. The boy looked up at me curiously.

"Happen you know her, lady," he remarked. "She's been here at this time, or thereabouts, pretty near every day for a fortnight."

Happen I know her! Yes, that was the boy's odd phrase. It rang in my ears, and I found myself gasping for breath. My eyes were fixed upon that tall, slender figure, clothed in sober black, waiting upon the doorstep with bowed head, and standing very still and motionless. It was like an effigy of patience. There were not two women in the world like that; it was impossible. She was in England, and alone—free! What did it mean? Should I run to her, or hide away? I glanced over my shoulder where the black shadows of the tunnel were only dimly lit by the feeble gaslight. I could steal away, and she would

never see me. Yet as I thought of it, the grimy, barren street and the solemn-looking building faded away before my eyes. The sun and wind burned my face; the wind, salt with ocean spray, and echoing with the hoarse screaming of the sea-birds that rode upon it. I was at Cruta again, panting to be free, stealing away in the twilight down the narrow path amongst the rocks to where that tiny boat lay waiting, like a speck upon the waters. And it was she who had helped me—the sad-faced woman who had braved the terrible anger of the man whom we had both dreaded. Again I heard her gentle words of counsel, and the answering lies which should have blistered my lips. For I lied to her, not hastily or on impulse, but deliberately in cold blood. Anything, I cried to myself, to escape from this rock, this living death! So I lied to her, and she helped me. No wonder that I trembled. No wonder that I half made up my mind to flee away into the sheltering darkness of that noisome-looking tunnel.

It takes long to set down in writing the thoughts which flashed through me at that moment. Yet when I had made up my mind the woman was still there, waiting meekly before the closed door.

"You were speaking of her," I said to the boy, who was half-sitting, half-crouching against the side of the tunnel. "What was it you said? I did not hear."

Man and boy commenced to tell me together. Their strange London talk puzzled me, and I could only extract a confused sense of what they said. The woman, to whom they rudely pointed, had called at the building opposite every day for a fortnight at about this hour to make some inquiry. Day by day she had turned away, after one brief question asked and answered, with bowed head and dejected manner. Yet, day by day, she returned and repeated it. Ever the same disappointment, the same despair!

They knew nothing more. Her regular visits had awakened a certain curiosity in them, and they had commenced to look for them, and indulge in a little mild speculation as to her one day meeting with a different reception. Nothing more! There was a shade of pity in the boy's tone, and I gave him a shilling; then I crossed the road.

As I left the kerbstone, the door opened and I heard her question:—

"Has Father Adrian called or written, or sent any address yet, please?"

The man, who had opened the door only a few inches, kept in the background, and I could see nothing of him, but I heard his grim, monosyllable reply:

"No! Father Adrian has not visited or communicated with us."

She turned away with a meek "Thank you," and found herself face to face with me. My heart smote me when I saw how poor were her clothes, and how thin her features.

At first she did not know me; but I raised my veil, and whispered her name softly in her ear.

She threw up her hands, and swayed backwards and forwards upon the pavement.

"Adrea! Adrea!" she cried wildly. "My God!"

A cab drove up, and I called it. She had just strength enough to enter it, leaning heavily upon my arm; then she fainted.

## CHAPTER XII

### "WE ARE LIKE SHOOTING STARS, WHOSE MEETING IS THEIR RUIN"

To-NIGHT I have had another shock! I was sitting alone in my room down-stairs, dreaming over the fire, when a footstep sounded upon the stairs. At first I thought that it might be Paul, and I sprang up, and stood listening intently. What a little fool I was! I felt the colour burning in my cheeks, and my heart was beating. I listened to the tread, and the madness passed away. It was a man's footsteps, but not Paul's.

They halted at my door, and there was a firm, deliberate knock. Before I could reply, the handle was turned, and a figure stood upon the threshold.

My little chamber was in darkness, but the clear, cold voice struck a vague note of familiarity.

"I seek Adrea Kiros! Are these her rooms? Are you she?"

I struck a match with trembling fingers, and looked eagerly towards the doorway. A man stood there,

dark, stern, and forbidding, looking steadfastly towards me. My memory had not deceived me! It was Father Adrian!

"You have found me out," I said slowly. "Come inside and close the door."

He moved slowly forward, and stood in the middle of the room. His face was as white as marble and as steadfast; but his dark eyes, which seemed to be challenging mine to meet them, were full of smouldering fire. I summoned up all my courage, and threw myself into a low chair, with a little laugh.

"You are not exactly cordial," I said. "If you have anything to say to me, won't you sit down?"

"If I have anything to say to you!" he repeated, and his whole tone seemed vibrating with hardly subdued passion. "If I have anything to say to you! Is this your greeting?"

"Why, no, not if you come as a friend! But when you stand and glare at me *comme cela*, what do you expect? Nothing very cordial, surely!"

He advanced a step further towards me. I watched him steadfastly, and I knew that the old madness was not dead. I was glad. It made the struggle between us more even.

"Have I no cause to look at you sternly, Adrea?" he demanded,—"you who deceived us! you who lied

to us, to win our aid! Where would you have been now had it not been for me? At Cruta! Would to God my hand had withered before it had set you free!"

"You are very kind!"

"Girl, are you mad? At Cruta you were thoughtless and gay, but God knows your heart was pure. Now you are a paid dancing girl!"

I turned upon him suddenly, rising to my full height, and looking him straight in the face. He did not flinch, but a faint colour rose to his forehead as he continued.

"Stop!" I said. "You are talking of those things which you do not understand. You could not possibly understand. You and I are different; we belong to different worlds. The things of your world are not the things of mine. Leave me now, and for ever, and let us go our own ways. We measure things by different quantities. You are a priest, and very much a priest, and I am a woman, and very much a woman! For the past I am grateful; for its sake I forget the insults of the present. Now go!"

I knew quite well that he would not take me at my word, nor did he.

"Adrea, I cannot go and lose all knowledge of you for ever," he said sadly. "For my own sake I would say, Would to God that I could! but it is impossible.

Within me there is a voice which whispers 'Fly,' but I cannot; your future is still as dear to me as in the old days. Oh! Adrea! I have sorrowed and mourned lest our last parting had been for ever, and now, alas! I would that it had been; I would to God that I had never found you out!"

"You can forget it," I said coldly.

"I can never forget it," he answered fiercely. "Girl! you seem to me sometimes like a scourge! Your memory is a very nightmare of sin! You have brought me nothing but pain and remorse and anguish of heart. For all my suffering there is no brighter side; yet I cannot forget it!"

Despite his fierce words, which for a moment had burned in my ears, I pitied him. In the old days he had been my champion, and it was his hand, together with hers, which had aided my escape from Cruta. So I spoke to him softly.

"I am sorry! As I said, we are of different moulds, and we belong to a different branch of humanity. We are neither of us inclined to change! Let us go our own ways, and apart!"

He was close by my side now, and his hand was resting on the back of my chair. I laid mine upon it for a moment; it was cold as ice, and shaking. The old madness was upon him indeed.

"You were kind to me at Cruta," I continued. "I do not forget it, and I thank you for it! But we are as far apart as the poles, and we must continue so."

The position between us seemed reversed. He stood by my side, pale and passionate, with his clear eyes full of a strange wistfulness.

"All that you say is, in a measure, true," he said in a low tone; "yet do not send me away from you! Some day you may see things differently; some day trouble may come to you, and I may be your helper! There is only one thing: I would have you look upon me as a brother, and I would have you give me a brother's confidence."

"I would gladly be friends with you," I answered, "only do not seek more than I choose to tell you. As for the things you charge me with, there is truth and falsehood in them. It is true that I have earned my living by dancing, but it has been in private only. Of course, you know nothing about it; how should you? But I am not a ballet dancer, as I believe you think."

"You are not upon the stage, then?"

"No! nor do I dance in short skirts! Some day I will give you an exhibition in this room! Now don't look like that," I added quickly; "I was only joking. I would not defile the air around your saintliness for the world! But I want to tell you this: my dancing is

recognised as an art. I rank everywhere with the men and women who are called artists, the men and women who are ever striving to realize in some manner a particular ideal of beauty through different channels. The highest development of physical beauty in the human form is in grace of motion. I aim at the beautiful in illustrating this. I didn't know it myself until a great painter told me so, but I am beginning to understand. I don't expect you to; you must take it on trust."

"It sounds strange to me, but I do not doubt that there is truth, some truth in it," he admitted gravely.

"You and I look upon life, and all its connections, with different eyes," I continued. "What may seem sin to you, may be justified to me. Yet I will stoop to answer your unspoken question. As I was at Cruta, so I am now! It may be that I am better, for I have done a good action!"

He held up his hand, but I took no notice.

"I will tell it you. A few days ago, chance brought in my way a most unhappy woman. She had escaped from an odious captivity, only to find herself alone, friendless and penniless in a strange city. The man on whom she had counted for help she could not find. He had given her an address where she might always

hear of him. Day by day she inquired there in vain. It may have been through no fault of his, but she was in sore straits."

"Her name?"

"I found her, and brought her home. She lives with me; she is here!"

The door was opening as I spoke, and she entered. They stood face to face, silent with the shock of so sudden a meeting. Then he stepped quickly forward, and, taking her hands, drew her to him. I slipped away, and left them alone together.

## CHAPTER XIII

### "THE PATH THAT LEADS TO MADMEN'S KINGDOMS"

A NORTH-COUNTRY storm of rain and wind had suddenly blown up from the sea, and the few remaining followers of the De Vaux hounds were dispersed right and left, making for home with all possible speed. The sky had looked dull and threatening all day long, and with the first shades of twilight the rain had commenced to fall in a sudden torrent. There had been some little hesitation on the part of the master about drawing this last cover, for the hounds had had a rough day, and the field was small; and directly the storm broke, the horn was blown without hesitation, The pack was re-called, and the huntsman, cracking his whip, started for home at a long, swinging trot. The day's sport was over.

There were only a handful of horsemen waiting outside when the signal was given, and with collars turned up to their ears, and cigars alight, they were very soon riding down the hill to the village whose lights were beginning to twinkle out from the darkness in the

valley below. At the cross-roads, Paul, who had been riding in the midst of them, wheeled his horse round and took the road to Vaux Abbey amidst a chorus of farewells.

"Are you going for the Abbey, De Vaux?" Captain Westover asked, reining in his horse. "Better come home with me, and dine! I'll send you back to-night, and they'll look after your mare all right in the stables. Come along!"

Paul shook his head. "I'll get home, thanks!" he answered. "A wetting won't hurt me, and there's only a mile or two of it."

Captain Westover shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you like. My people would be very glad to see you! By the bye, you were to have called last week, weren't you? Lady May was asking where you were this morning! Come and dine to-morrow night!"

"Thanks! Unless I send word over to the contrary, I will, then! Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

Captain Westover cantered on after the others, and Paul turned off in the opposite direction, riding slowly, with bent head and loose bridle. In his pocket was Adrea's letter, scarcely a week old; and now that the physical excitement of the day was over, his thoughts, as usual, were full of it again. It was an uphill battle

that he was fighting! All day long he had been striving to forget it! He had spared neither himself nor his horses in the desperate attempt to reach such a stage of physical exhaustion as should make his mind a blank—as should free it, at any rate, from those torturing memories, and the fierce restlessness which they begat. He had tried his utmost, and he had failed. His pink hunting-coat and tops, immaculate at the start, were covered with thick mud, and his horse (his second mount) was scarcely able to put one foot before the other. Yet he had failed utterly. Hunger and fatigue seemed things far away to him. Wherever he looked—out into the grey mists, which came rolling across the moor, soaking him with moisture, or down into the road, fast becoming a bog, or up into the dim sky—he seemed to see the pages of Adrea's letter standing out before him, word for word, phrase for phrase. Every sentence of it seemed to him as vivid and real as though it had been spoken in his ears; nay, he could almost fancy that he saw the great tears welling slowly out of those soft, dark eyes, and could hear the passionate quiver in her faltering tones. Day by day it had been a desperate struggle with him to resist the mad desire which prompted him to order a dog-cart, drive to the nearest town, and catch the mail train to London. Beyond that—how she would receive him,

what he would say to her—everything was chaos; he dared not trust himself to think about it.

Yet, whenever he suffered his thoughts to dwell upon this matter at all, the reverse side of it all sooner or later presented itself. Clear and insistent above the emotion which swayed him came ever that uncompromising question—where lay his duty in this matter? It was the true and manly side of his nature, developed by instinct and long training, and refusing now to be overborne and swept away by this surging tide of passion. It rang in his ears, and it demanded an answer. Away in the distance, on the opposite side of the valley, his vacant eyes rested idly upon the many lights and dim outline of Westover Castle. What place had Lady May in his heart? Was there room for her—and Adrea? Could he see Adrea day by day, and never pass the barrier which he himself had set up between them. What did he wish? What was right? Just then everything was to him so vague and chaotic.

He had been riding for nearly an hour, with his reins quite loose upon his horse's neck, and trusting entirely to her to take the homeward route. Suddenly his mare came to an abrupt halt, and Paul looked around him in surprise. At first he had not the faintest idea as to his whereabouts; then a dull roar, coming from across a narrow strip of moorland on his left,

gave him a clue, and he saw what had happened. Instead of turning inland to Vaux Abbey, his horse had kept straight on, and had brought him almost to the sea—a good five miles out of his way.

The situation was not a cheerful one. They were ten miles from home, and Ironsides, completely done up, was trembling ominously at the knees, and looking around at him pitifully. Paul himself was wet to the skin; and as he dismounted for a moment to ease his stiff limbs, he was conscious of a distinct inclination to shiver. The grey mists were rolling up all round them; and directly Paul's feet touched the ground, he felt himself sink ankle-deep in the wet, soft sand. It was all horribly uncomfortable, and more than that, it was serious; for immediately he had passed his hand over his horse's flanks and felt her knees, Paul knew that she was not in a condition for him to mount her again. There was no hope of reaching Vaux Abbey without rest and refreshments, for Ironsides at any rate.

He looked steadily around him, and began to get some faint idea as to his whereabouts. His mare must have been deceived by following a private road which led to a cottage belonging to an old half-pay officer, Major Harcourt. They had evidently passed the cottage, and pursued the road almost to its termination,

for where they now were it was little better than a sheep-track, leading through a closed gate a few yards in front of them into a scattered pine plantation and down to the sea. The only thing to do was to retrace their steps until they came to the cottage, and there beg shelter for a while.

"We've made a mess of it, old girl!" Paul said soothingly, patting his mare's neck, and passing his arm through the bridle. "Come on, then! We'll see whether we can't find an empty stall for you at Major Harcourt's."

They retraced their steps, the mare limping wearily along by Paul's side, and every now and then stopping to look at him in despair. Paul found a grim humour in the situation. It was the quagmire into which thoughts of Adrea had led him; a parable sent to show him the folly of such thoughts, and whither they tended. He laughed a little bitterly at the thought. Once, when a very young man, he had thought himself a fatalist. After all, perhaps it was the best thing to be! Conscience and duty were wearisome guides; a course of voluntary drifting would be rather a relief.

Suddenly the mare pricked up her ears, and neighed. Paul looked steadily through the mist, and quickened his pace. Scarcely a hundred yards ahead was the dim outline of the cottage, nestled up against a pine grove and facing the sea.

Paul was fairly well acquainted with Major Harcourt; and although he had seen nothing of him for some time, he had not the slightest compunction in claiming shelter for himself and his horse. He led her up the trim, winding drive to the front door, and rang the bell.

"Is Major Har——" Paul began, as the door was opened; then he broke off abruptly.

The man-servant who had opened the door, and was standing on the step, peering out into the darkness, was a familiar figure to him. It was Gomez!

## CHAPTER XIV

### "THE POISON OF HONEY FLOWERS"

THE recognition was not immediately simultaneous. Gomez, standing on the step, was in the full light of the hall lamp, but Paul was still amongst the shadows.

"Don't you know me, Gomez?" Paul asked, stepping forward. "I am Paul de Vaux."

A shade passed across the man's face, and he laid his hand quickly upon his heart, as though to cease some sudden pain. Then he stood on one side, holding the door open.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Paul; I could not see your face out there. Won't you walk in, sir?"

Paul dropped his mare's bridle and stepped inside. The polished white stone hall, with its huge fire in the centre, looked warm and comfortable, and away in the distance there was a cheerful rattle of teacups.

"What are you doing here, Gomez?" Paul asked, shaking the wet from his hat. "I understood that you were going to take the under-bailiff's place."

"Higgs has not left yet, sir," Gomez answered. I

have been living here as caretaker for Major Harcourt."

"Caretaker! Isn't he at home then?"

Gomez shook his head, looking keenly at Paul all the time. "Major Harcourt does not winter here now, sir. He has let the place, furnished."

"What a confounded nuisance! To whom has he let it?" Paul asked quickly. "You see my plight, and my horse is worse off still. We lost our way going home from Dunston Spinnies."

"Major Harcourt's tenant is a lady," Gomez answered, after a moment's hesitation. "She only arrived yesterday."

Paul shrugged his shoulders. He was annoyed, but there was no help for it.

"Well, will you see her at once and represent matters? I want a loose box for the night for my horse, and a rest for myself, and afterwards a conveyance for the Abbey, if possible. Tell her my name. I daresay she won't mind. Who is she?"

Gomez said nothing for a moment. Then he drew Paul back to the door, and pointed out into the darkness.

"Mr. Paul," he said, in a quick, hoarse whisper, "at the back of that hedge there is a road which leads straight up to the Abbey. It is a matter of six miles or so, I know, and you are tired; but that is nothing.

Take my advice, sir, and believe me it is for your good. Get out of this house as soon as you can, and go home, though you have to walk every step. I'll look after your horse, and you can send for it in the morning."

Paul looked into the man's face astonished. "What nonsense, Gomez!" he exclaimed. "Do you know what you are talking about! Why, I'm tired out, and almost starved. Here I am and here I shall stop, unless your mistress is as inhospitable as you are,"

Gomez bowed, and closed the door. "Very good sir; you will have your own way, of course. But remember in the future that I was faithful, I warned you. Come this way, sir. I will send your horse round to the stables. The name of the lady of the house is Madame de Merteuill."

A little uneasy and very much mystified, Paul followed him across the hall, and was silently ushered into a long, low drawing-room, a room of nooks and corners, furnished in old-fashioned style, but with perfect taste, and dimly lit with soft, shaded lamps. There was a bright fire blazing on the hearth, and a pleasant sense of warmth in the air.

At first it seemed as though the room was empty, but in a moment a tall, pale-faced lady, with wonderfully dark eyes and grey hair, rose from an easy chair behind the piano, and looked at him, at first questioningly.

"I am afraid that you will consider this an unwarrantable intrusion," Paul said, bowing; "but the fact is, I lost my way riding home from the hunt, and my horse cannot go a yard further. As for myself, you can see what state I am in. I saw your lights, and have some acquaintance with Major Harcourt, and not knowing that he had left, I ventured here to throw myself upon his hospitality. My name is De Vaux—Paul de Vaux; and although it is some distance to the Abbey, I believe that we are next-door neighbours."

It was beginning to dawn upon Paul that he had somehow stumbled upon a very strange household. During the whole of his speech, the lady whom he was addressing had stood silent and transfixed, with wide-open eyes and a terrible shrinking look of fear upon her face. She must be mad, Paul concluded swiftly. What an ass Gomez was not to have told him! While he was wondering how to get away, she spoke.

"Your name de Vaux, Paul de Vaux, near Vaux Abbey?"

He bowed, looking at her with fresh interest. His name seemed familiar to her. In a moment or two the unnatural lethargy left her, and she spoke to him, though still in a curiously suppressed tone.

"I beg your pardon. You are welcome. I was a little startled at first."

She rang the bell. Gomez answered it.

"Bring some fresh tea, and some sandwiches and wine," she ordered. "Tell them in the stables to see that this gentleman's horse has every attention."

Gomez received his orders in silence, and withdrew with darkening face. Paul looked after him with surprise.

"Gomez does not seem particularly pleased to see me again," he remarked. "What is the matter with the man, I wonder?"

"It is only his manner, I think," she said softly. "He was your father's servant, was he not?"

"Yes. How did you know that?" he asked quickly. "Ah, I beg your pardon; he told you, of course. You will find him a faithful servant."

She bowed her head, but made no reply. Indeed, Paul found it very difficult to start a conversation of any sort with his new neighbour. To all his remarks she returned only monosyllabic answers, looking at him steadily all the while out of her full, dark eyes in a far-away, wistful manner, as though she saw in his face something which carried her thoughts into another world. It was a little uncomfortable for Paul, and he was not sorry when Gomez reappeared, bearing a tray with refreshments.

She handed him his tea in silence; and Paul, who would have been ashamed to have called himself curious, but who was by this time not a little puzzled at her manner, made one more effort at conversation.

"I think you said that you were quite strange to this part of the country," he remarked. "We, who have lived here all our lives, are fond of it; but I'm afraid you'll find it rather dull at first. There is very little society."

"We do not desire any," she said hastily. "We came here—at least I came here—for the sake of indulging in absolute seclusion. It is the same with my step-daughter. In London she had been forced to keep late hours, and her health has suffered. The doctor prescribed complete rest; I, too, desired rest, so we came here. A London house agent arranged it for us."

So there was a step-daughter who lived in London, and who went out a great deal. The mention of her gave Paul an opportunity.

"I wonder if I have ever met your daughter in town," he said pleasantly. "I am there a good deal, and I have rather a large circle of acquaintances."

The implied question seemed to disconcert her. She coloured, and then grew suddenly pale. Her eyes no longer looked into his; they were fixed steadfastly upon the fire.

"It is not at all probable," she said, nervously lacing and interlacing her slim white fingers. "No, it is scarcely possible. You would not be likely to meet her. Your friends would not be her friends. She knows so few people. Ah!"

She started quickly. The door had opened, but it was only Gomez, who had come in with a tray for the empty tea-things. There was a dead silence whilst he removed them. Paul scarcely knew what to say. His hostess puzzled him completely. Perhaps this step-daughter, whose name, together with her own, she seemed so anxious to conceal, was mad, and she had brought her down here instead of sending her to an asylum; or perhaps she herself was mad. He glanced at her furtively, and at once dismissed the latter idea. Her face, careworn and curiously pallid though it was, was the face of no madwoman. It was the face of a woman who had passed through a fiery sea of this world's trouble and suffering—suffering which had left its marks stamped upon her features; but, of his own accord, he would never have put it down as the face of a weak or erring woman.

There was a mystery—of that he felt sure; but it was no part of his business to seek to unravel it. The best thing he could do, he felt, was to get up and go. He could scarcely maintain a conversation without

asking or implying questions which seemed to painfully embarrass his hostess.

"I'm very much obliged to you," he said, rising and holding out his hand. "I feel quite a new man! If you don't mind I'd like to leave my mare here until to-morrow. She really isn't fit to travel. My man shall come for her early."

"Pray do!" she answered quickly. "Ah!"

She had started, and clutched at the back of her chair with trembling fingers. Her eyes, wide open and startled, were fixed upon the door.

Paul, too, turned round, and uttered a little cry. His heart beat fast, and the room swam before him. He stood for a moment perfectly still, with his eyes fastened upon the figure in the doorway.

## CHAPTER XV

### "AND MOST OF ALL WOULD I FLY FROM THE CRUEL MADNESS OF LOVE"

IT WAS Adrea—Adrea herself! She stood there in the shadow of the doorway, with her lips slightly parted, and her great eyes, soft and brilliant, flashing in the ruddy firelight. It was no vision; it was she beyond a doubt!

Even when the first shock had passed away, he found himself without words; the wonder of it had dazed him. He had thought of her so often in that quaint, dainty little chamber in Grey Street that to see her here so unexpectedly, without the least warning or anticipation, was like being suddenly confronted with a picture which had stepped out of its frame. And that she should be here, too, of all places, here in this bleak corner of the kingdom, where blustering winds swept bare the sullen moorland, and the sea was always grey and stormy. What strange fate could have brought her here, away from all the warmth and luxury of London, to this half-deserted old manor house

on the verge of the heath? His mind was too confused in those first few moments to follow out any definite train of thought. The most natural conclusion, that she had come to him, did not enter his imagination.

His first impulse, as his senses became clearer, was to glance around for the woman who had called Adrea her step-daughter. She was gone. She must have stepped out of the room by the opposite doorway; and with the knowledge that they were alone, he breathed freer.

"Adrea!" he said, "it is really you, then!"

His words, necessarily commonplace, dissolved the situation. She laughed softly, and came further into the room.

"It is I," she said. "Did you think that I was an elf from spirit-land?"

He had never shaken hands with her,—it was a thing which had never occurred to either of them; but a sudden impulse came to him then. He took a hasty step forward, and clasped both her little white hands in his. So they stood for another minute in silence, and a strange, soft light flashed in her upturned eyes. She was very near to him, and there was an indefinable sense of yielding in her manner, amounting almost to a mute invitation. He felt that he had only to open

his arms, and that strange, beautiful face, with its mocking, quivering mouth, would be very close to his. The old battle was forced upon him to fight all over again; and, alas! he was no stronger.

It was almost as though she had seen the hesitation—the conflict in him—for with a sudden, imperious gesture she withdrew her hands and turned away from him. There was a scarlet flush creeping through the deep olive of her cheeks, and her eyes were dry and brilliant. Paul, who had never studied women or their ways, looked at her, surprised and a little hurt.

"You are surprised to see me here, of course?" she said, sinking into a low easy-chair, and taking up a fire-screen of peacocks' feathers, as though to shield her face from the fire. "Well, it is quite an accident. I wrote you rather a silly letter the other day; but you must not think that I have followed you down here!"

"I did not think so," he answered hastily. "The idea never occurred, never could have occurred to me!"

She continued, without heeding his interruption: "I will explain how we came to take this cottage. A relative of mine came to me suddenly from abroad. She was in great trouble, and was in search of a very secluded dwelling-place, where she might live for a time unknown. I also was in bad health, and the doctor had ordered me complete rest and quiet. We went

to a house agent, and told him what we wanted—to get as far away from every one as possible. We did not care how lonely the place was, or how far from London; the further the better. This house was to let, furnished, and at a low figure. I did not know that Vaux Abbey was in the same county even. It suited us, and we took it."

"I understand," Paul answered. "And now that you are here, are you not afraid of finding it dull?"

She turned away from him, biting her lip. "You do not understand me! You never will. No! I shall not be dull."

"I beg your pardon, Adrea. I——"

"Be quiet!" she interrupted impetuously. "You think that I am too frivolous to live away from the glare and excitement of the city. Of course! To you I am just the dancing girl, nothing more. Do not contradict me. I hate your serious manner. I hate your patronage. Don't contradict me, I say. Tell me this. How did you find me out? Why are you here?"

"I have been out hunting, and I lost my way," Paul answered quietly. "I know Major Harcourt, and, thinking he was still living here, I called for a rest, and to put my horse up. Your step-mother has been very kind and hospitable."

Adrea looked at him curiously. "Indeed! She has

been kind to you, has she? Who told you that she was my step-mother?"

"I thought I understood you to say so."

"Did I? Perhaps so; I don't remember. So she was kind to you, was she? She has no cause to be."

"No cause to be! Why not?"

She shrugged her shoulders, "Oh, I don't know. I'm talking a little at random, I think. You angered me, Monsieur Paul. I am a silly girl, am I not? Do you know that I have thrown up all my engagements until next season? I do not think that I shall dance again at all."

"I am glad to hear it."

"But I shall go on the stage."

"There is no necessity for that, is there?"

"Necessity! You mean that I have not to earn my bread. That may be true, but what would you have me to do? I am not content to be one of your English young ladies—to sit down, and learn to cook and darn, and read silly books, until fate is kind enough to send me a husband. Not so. I have ambition; I have an artist's instincts, although I may not yet be an artist. I must live; I must have light and colour in my life."

Paul was very grave. He did not understand this new phase in Adrea's development. There was a curious hardness in her tone and a recklessness in her

speech which were strange to him. And with it all he felt very helpless. He could not play the part of guardian and reprove her; he scarcely knew how to argue with her. Women and their ways were strange to him; and, besides, Adrea was so different.

He stood up on the hearthrug, toying with his long riding-whip, puzzled and unhappy. Adrea was angry with him, he knew; and though he was very anxious to set himself right with her, he felt that he was treading on dangerous ground. He was neither sure of himself nor of her.

"I am afraid I am a very poor counsellor, Adrea," he said slowly; "but it seems to me that you want women friends. Your life has been too lonely, too devoid of feminine interests."

She laughed—a mirthless, unpleasant little laugh. "Women friends! Good! You say that I have none. It is true. There have been no women who have offered me their friendship in this country. You call yourself my guardian. Why do you not find me some?"

"You have made it very difficult," he reminded her.

She threw a scornful glance at him. "Good! That is generous. You mean to say that I have made myself unfit for the friendship of the women of your family. I thank you, Monsieur Paul. I think that

our conversation has lasted long enough. Let me pass; I am going to leave you."

He moved quickly towards the door, and barred her passage. There was a dark flush in his cheeks and a gleam in his eyes. Up till then his manner had been a little deprecating, but at her last words it had suddenly changed. He felt that she was unjust, and he was indignant.

"Adrea, you talk like a child," he said sternly. "I made no such insinuation as you suggest! You know that I did not! Sit down!"

She obeyed him; the quick change in his manner had startled her, and taken her at a disadvantage. She felt the force of his superior will, and she yielded to it.

He leaned over her chair, and his voice grew softer. "Adrea, you are very, very unjust to me," he said. "Do you wish to make me so unhappy, I wonder? For a week I have been thinking of scarcely anything else save our last parting, and now if I had not stopped you, almost by force, you would have left me again in anger."

His tone had grown almost tender, and, as though unconsciously, his hand had rested upon her gleaming coils of dark, braided hair, She looked up at him, and in the firelight he could see that her eyes were soft and dim.

"You have really thought of me?" she said in a low tone. "You have really been unhappy on my account?"

"I have!" he admitted. "Very unhappy!"

Something in his tone—in the reluctance with which he made the admission, angered her. She moved a little further away, and her voice grew harder.

"Yes; you have been unhappy!" she said. "And why? It was because you were ashamed to find yourself thinking of me; you, Paul de Vaux, a citizen of the world and a man of culture, thinking of a poor dancing girl with only her looks to recommend her! That was where the sting lay! That was what reddened your cheek! You men! You are as selfish as devils!"

She stamped her foot; her voice was shaking with passion. Paul stood before her with a deep flush on his pale cheeks, silent, like a man suddenly accused. Her words were not altogether true, but they were winged with, at any rate, the semblance of truth.

She continued—a little more quietly, but with her tone and form still vibrating.

"What do you fear? What is that you struggle against? I have seen you when it has been your will to take me—into your arms, to hold my hands. Then I have seen you conquer the desire, and you run away,

as though afraid of it. Why? Do you fear that I shall seek to compromise you?—is not that the English word? Do you think that I want you to marry me? Is it because you dare not, that you—you do not offer to take my hand, even? Tell me now! Why is it?"

"For your own sake, Adrea!"

"For my own sake!" she repeated scornfully. "Do you believe it yourself? Do you really think that it is true? I will tell you why it is! It is because you have no thought, no imagination. You say to yourself, she is not of my world. I cannot marry her."

There was a silence. A burning coal fell upon the hearth, and flamed up; the glow reached Paul's face. He was very pale, and his eyes were dry and brilliant. Suddenly he moved forward, and clasped Adrea's hands tightly in his.

"But, Adrea! are you sure that you love me?"

A sudden change swept into her face. Her dark eyes grew wonderfully soft.

"Yes!" she answered, looking up to him with a swift, brilliant smile. "I am sure!"

He held out his arms; his resistance was at an end. It had grown weaker and weaker during those last few moments; now it was all over, swept away by a sudden, tumultuous passion, so strange and little akin to

the man that it startled even himself. Afar off in his mind he was conscious of a dim sense of shame as he held her close in his arms and felt her warm, trembling lips pressed against his. But it was like an echo from a distant land. It seemed to him that a deep, widening gulf lay now between him and all that had gone before. His old self was dead! A new man had sprung up, with a new personality, and the time had not yet come for regrets.

## CHAPTER XVI

"'TWIXT YOU AND ME A NOISOME SHADOW CAST"

"ADREA!"

It was a cry which seemed to ring through the room, an interruption so sudden and strange that they started apart like guilty children, gazing towards the lifted curtain which divided the apartment with wondering, half-fearful faces. The woman whom Adrea had called her step-mother stood there, pale and bloodless, with her great black eyes flashing, and behind her a tall, dark figure was gazing sternly at them.

Adrea was the first to recover her composure. She was a little further away, and she could see only her step-mother.

"What do you want?" she exclaimed quickly. "I desire to be alone! Why do you stand there?"

There was no answer. Then the momentary silence was broken by a quick, startled cry from Paul, which seemed to cleave the semi-darkness of the room.

"My God!"

The dark figure had moved forward, and was standing, pale and austere, before them. It was Father Adrian.

There was a moment's intense silence. Then Paul turned swiftly round to where Adrea stood, a little behind him. But the suspicions which had commenced to crowd in upon him vanished before even they had taken to themselves definite shape. Her surprise was as great as his; and, as their eyes met, she shuddered with the memory which his presence had recalled.

"Paul de Vaux, I had no thought of meeting you here," Father Adrian said sternly.

Paul met his gaze haughtily. There was a rebuke, almost a threat, in the priest's tone which angered him. Whatever his presence here might betide, he was in no way responsible for it to Father Adrian.

"Nor I you," he answered. "I imagined that you were staying at the monastery."

"I am staying there."

Madame de Merteuill stepped slowly into the room. She was still trembling, and had all the appearance of a woman sore stricken by some unexpected calamity. Even her voice was faint and broken.

"Father Adrian is a visitor here only—an unexpected one—like yourself."

"Why is he here?" Adrea asked slowly. "Has he come to see us again? What does he want?"

Father Adrian turned towards her, grave and severe. "I have come to see Madame de Merteuill. I bring her a message from an old man whom, by her absence, she is wronging. You I did not expect to find here,—and thus."

She made no answer. The priest drew a little nearer to her, and his thin, ascetic face seemed suddenly ablaze with scorn and anger.

"Child! your destiny is surely to bring sorrow upon all those who would watch over you, and shape your life aright. Where you have been living, and how, since your flight, I do not know. You have hidden yourself well! You have shown more than the ordinary selfishness of childhood! You have thought nothing of those who may have troubled for you! I do not ask for your confidence. This is enough for me: I find you here in his arms—his of all men in the world! False to your Church; false to your sex; false to your father's memory! Shameless!"

She did not flinch from before him. She looked him in the face, coldly and without fear.

"You are a priest, and you do not understand. Be so good as to remember that I am no longer now in your power or under your authority. You cannot

threaten to make me a nun any longer. Remember that I am outside your life now, and outside your religion."

"You can be brought back," he said calmly. "I have powers."

"Powers which I defy. Your religion is a cold, dry farce, and I hate it. You cannot frighten me; you cannot alarm me in the least. You can do ugly things, I know, in the name of your Church; and if you had me back at the convent, or on that awful island, I should be frightened at you. Here, I am not.'

Instinctively she glanced toward Paul. Already in her thoughts, he was assuming the protector. He would not suffer harm to come to her. He was strong and rich and powerful. The horror of days gone by had already grown faint with her; it was little more than memory. It was gone, and could not come again.

"I have not come here to talk with you, child," he answered quietly. "My errand has been with Madame de Merteuill, and it is accomplished, I go now. Paul de Vaux, our ways lie together for a mile or more, and I have a word to say to you. Let us go."

Paul was slowly recovering from a state of mental stupor, and, with his discovery, something of the glamour of his late intoxication was passing away. He had no regret, there was nothing which he would have

recalled; but his eyes were stronger to pierce the mists, and he was able to bring the weight of impersonal thought to bear upon all that had passed between Adrea and himself. Wheresoever it might lead, there was a tie between them now which could not be lightly severed.

"It is time I went," Paul answered. "Adrea, I will come and see you to-morrow."

She looked at the priest, suspicious and troubled. "What does he want with you, Paul?" she whispered. "Don't go with him!"

"I must!" he answered sadly. "He has something to say to me which I wish to hear. I will come and see you to-morrow."

"If you must, then, until to-morrow. But, Paul!"

She drew him on one side. "Beware of him! Oh! beware of him!" she said quickly, her eyes full of fear. "He is a fanatic, a Jesuit. Don't trust him! Have little to say to him. Hush! don't answer me! He is watching. Good-night, beloved! my beloved!"

## CHAPTER XVII

"IF LOVE YOU CHOOSE, THEN LOVE SHALL BE YOUR RUIN"

PAUL and his companion walked down the avenue in silence, and turned into the narrow, stony road which wound across the moor. The storm was over, and the rain had ceased. Above them, only faintly visible, as though seen through a canopy of delicate lace, the stars were shining in a cloudless sky through the wreaths of faint grey mist. Far off, the sound of the sea came rolling across the moor to their ears, now loud and threatening as it beat against the iron cliffs and thundered up the coombs, now striking a shriller note as the huge waves, ever beaten off, retreated, dragging beach and shingle with them. It had been an ocean gale, and the very air was salt and brackish with flavours of the sea. Here and there great piles of seaweed had been carried in a heterogeneous mass to their feet, and the ground beneath them was soft and sandy. But the storm had died away as suddenly as it had come. The tall, stark pine trees, which a

few hours ago had been bending like whips before the rushing wind, stood now stiff and stark against the wan sky. There was not even motion enough in the air to clear away the white mists which hung around. Only the troubled sea remained to mark the passage of the storm.

Paul was in no mood for talking. He recognised the fact that what had happened to him that evening must, to a certain extent, colour his whole life. He wanted to think it over quietly, now that he was away from the influence of Adrea's passionately beautiful face and pleading eyes. He had an inward sense of great disappointment in himself, and he was anxious to see how far this was justified. He was prepared for a rigid self-examination, and he was impatient to begin upon it. But, while he was still upon the threshold of his meditations, his companion's voice sounded in his ear.

"Paul de Vaux, I have a word or two to say to you."

Paul awoke with a start. "Certainly!" he said gravely. "I am ready."

Father Adrian continued, speaking slowly and keeping his eyes fixed steadily upon Paul; "Only a few nights ago we met amongst the ruins of your old Abbey. You will remember that I spoke to you of your father's last hours, of a strange story confided to

my keeping—a story of sin and of sorrow—a story casting its shadow far into the future. You remember this?"

"Perfectly!"

"At first you seemed to consider that this story, told to me on his deathbed by a man who was at least repentant, should be held sacred—sacred to me as a priest of the Holy Church, and sacred to you as his son. Yet, as you saw afterwards, it was not so. The confession was made to me as a man; and withal it was made by one outside the pale of any religion whatever. It was mine to do as I chose with! It is mine now!"

"If it is anything which concerns me, or the honour of my family, you should tell me. If it involves wrongs which should be righted, or in any way concerns the future, you should tell me. You must have come for that purpose! You must mean to eventually, or why should you have found your way to this out-of-the-way corner of the world. Let me hear it now, Father Adrian!"

"It will darken your life!"

"I do not believe it! At any rate I will judge for myself. Let me hear it!"

The priest looked away into the darkness, and his voice was low and hoarse. "You do not know what you ask!" he said. "No, I shall not tell you yet. It

is for your own sake! Sometimes I think that I will go away and never tell you."

"Why not? You came here for no other reason."

Father Adrian shook his head. "I did not come to tell you. It was your home I came to see. Many hundreds of years ago Vaux Abbey was a monastery, sacred to the saint whose name I unworthily bear. My visit here was half a pilgrimage! But," he went on, his brows contracting, and his eyes gleaming fire, "since I came, I have been perilously near striking the blow which I have power to strike. You bear a name which for centuries was foremost in the history of our sacred Church. For generation after generation the De Vauxs were good Catholics and the benefactors of their Church. Your chapel was richly adorned, and five priests dwelt here always with old Sir Roland de Vaux. And now, where is your chapel, once the most beautiful in England; it is a pile of ruins, like your faith! I wander round in your villages. Your tenants have gone the way of their lord. Roman Catholicism is a dying power. Hideous chapels have sprung up in all your districts! The true faith is neglected! And who is to blame for it all? Your recreant family. You, who should have been the most zealous upholders of religion, have drifted down the stream of fashion, nerveless and indifferent. Oh! it is heresy, rank heresy, to

think of a De Vaux, such as you, dwelling indifferent amongst the mighty associations of your name and home! I wander about amongst those magnificent ruins of yours, æsthetically beautiful, but nevertheless a living, burning reproach, and I ask myself whether I do well in holding my peace. I cannot tell! I cannot tell!"

Paul was moved in spite of himself by the vehemence of his companion's words. The horrors of that deathbed scene at Cruta had never grown dim to him. He had always felt that his father had only decided to keep something back from him in those last moments, after a bitter struggle; and he was now quite sure that whatever it might have been, the secret had been confided to this priest.

"I want to ask you a question," he said. "Whatever this mystery may be to which you are constantly alluding, I am of course ignorant. But you seem to have some understanding with the two women whom we have left this evening. I want to know whether Adrea is concerned in it."

"She is not!"

"Nor Madame de Merteuill?"

"I cannot tell you!"

They were in the Abbey grounds, close to the ruins, and the moorland lay behind them, with its floating

mists and vague obscurity. Here the sky was soft and clear, and every pillar amongst the ruins stood out against the empty background of sea and sky. Father Adrian paused.

"I will come no further," he said. "I am a saner man away from your despoiled home. There is just a last word which I have to say to you."

Paul stood still, and listened.

"I have borne much," Father Adrian said, "much tempting and many impulses; but I have zealously put a watch upon my tongue, and I have spared you. For the future, your happiness—nay, your future itself—is in your own hands. I saw your father kill the only relative Adrea had in this world. We saw the deed done, though we have both held our peace concerning it. Paul de Vaux, I am inclined to spare you a great blow which it is in my power to strike. I am inclined to spare you, but I make one hard and fast condition. Adrea is not for you! She must be neither your wife, nor your friend, nor your ward! There must be no dealings, no knowledge between you the one of the other! There is blood between you; it can never be wiped out! The stain is forever. Lift up your hand to heaven, and swear that you will never willingly look upon her face again, or, as God is my master, I will bring upon your name, and your family, and you, swift and everlasting shame!"

His hand fell to his side, and his voice, which had been vibrating with passion, died away in a little, suppressed sob. Paul looked at him steadily. The perspiration was standing out upon his forehead in great beads, and his eyes were dry and brilliant. The man was shaken to the very core, and in the strange upheaval of passion he had altogether lost his sacerdotality. It was the man who had spoken, the man, passionate and sensuous, deeply moved through every chord of his being. The "priest" had fallen away from him, the remembrance of it seemed almost grotesque. Paul, too, had caught much of the passionate excitement of the moment.

"Time!" he said hoarsely. "I must have time. A few days only. I ask no questions! Only how long?"

"A week!" the priest answered. "A week to-night we meet here!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### "SOFTLY GLIMMERING THROUGH THE LAURELS AT THE QUIET EVENFALL"

"Do you know who has taken Major Harcourt's cottage, Mr. de Vaux?" Lady May asked.

Paul was silent for a moment. He sat quite still in his saddle, and gazed across the moor, with his hand shading his eyes.

"I beg your pardon, Lady May," he said. "I thought that I heard the dogs. You asked me——"

"About Major Harcourt's cottage. Do you know who has taken it?"

"I am not sure about the name. It is a foreign lady, and her step-daughter, I believe. There is a clergyman—or a Roman Catholic priest, rather—too; but he may be only a visitor."

"Indeed!"

The monosyllable was expressive. Paul glanced at his companion with slightly arched eyebrows. What had she heard? Something, evidently, for there had been a coolness in her manner all the morning, and her

clear grey eyes were resting now upon the many gables of the cottage just below them, with distinct disapproval. Now that he thought of it, Paul remembered that a dogcart from the Castle had whirled past him as he had turned out of the drive last night. Doubtless he had been seen and recognised. Well! after all, what did it matter? The time when he had meant to ask Lady May to be his wife seemed very far back in the past now. Between that part of his life and now, there was a great gulf fixed. Last night had altered everything!

He had certainly not meant to hunt that morning, but it had been forced upon him. Quite early, Reynolds had come to his room to inquire whether he should provide breakfast for thirty or fifty, and had reminded him that the meet was in front of the Abbey. So, against his will, Paul had been compelled to entertain the hunt and join in it himself. Lady May had been specially invited to breakfast, but she had not come, and Paul had only just seen her for the first time at the cover side. She had greeted him coldly; and though they had somehow taken up a position a little apart from the others, very few words had passed between them. Her frank, delicate face was clouded, and her manner was reserved.

"I believe my brother knows who they are," she

continued, after a short silence. "He saw them at the station."

Paul bit his lip, and turned away. The mystery of Lady May's manner was explained now.

"Did he tell you, then?"

Lady May toyed with her whip, and then looked Paul straight in the face. "Yes! he told me the name of the younger one. It is Adrea Kiros, the dancing girl. Mr. de Vaux, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly!"

Lady May looked straight between her horse's ears, and a slight flush stole into her cheeks. "You must not think that I was listening; it was not so at all. But last night, as I was passing the billiard-room, I heard my brother and Captain Mortimer talking. They were coupling your name with this—Miss Adrea Kiros. They spoke of her coming down here as though you must have known something of it. They were blaming you, as though you were responsible for her coming. We have been friends, Mr. de Vaux; and so far as I am concerned, our friendship has been very pleasant. But if there is any truth in what they said—well, you can guess the rest. I want you to tell me yourself; I am never content to accept hearsay evidence against my friends. I prefer to be unconventional, as you see. Please tell me!"

"Will you put your question a little more definitely, Lady May?" Paul asked slowly.

"Certainly! Has that young person come here at your instigation? Did you arrange for her to come here?"

"I did not! No one could have been more surprised to see her than I was."

Lady May was growing very stiff. She sat up in her saddle, and drew the reins through her fingers. "You know her?"

"I do!"

"You visited her in London?"

"I did!"

"You were at the cottage last evening?"

"I was! I lost my way, and——"

Lady May touched her horse with her spur. "Thank you, Mr. de Vaux!" she said haughtily. "I will not trouble you any more. Please don't follow me!"

Paul watched her ride down the hillside and join one of the little groups dotted about outside the cover-side, with a curious sense of unreality. After a while he broke into a little laugh, and, shaking his reins, lit a cigar. This was a new character for him altogether. He knew himself that no man had kept his life more blameless than he! If anything, he felt sometimes that he had erred upon the other side in thinking and

speaking too hastily of those who had been less circumspect. And now, it had come to this. The woman whose good opinion he had always valued next to his mother's had deliberately accused him of what must have seemed to her a flagrant outrage on decency. Her words were still ringing in his ears: "Please don't follow me." Lady May had said that to him; it was a little hard to realize.

A commotion around the cover below was a welcome diversion to him just then. A fox had got clear away, and hounds were in full cry. Paul pressed his hat down, and settled into his saddle with a grim smile. The physical excitement was just what he wanted, and in a few minutes he was leading the field, with only the master by his side, and Captain Westover a few yards behind.

At the first check, Captain Westover rode up to him. "I want just a word or two with you, De Vaux!" he said, drawing him on one side.

Paul drew himself up in his saddle, and sat there glum and unbending. "I am at your service," he answered. "I have had the pleasure already of a short conversation with your sister this morning."

Captain Westover nodded. "I suppose so. I want to beg your pardon first for what I am going to say, De Vaux. If I make an ass of myself, don't scruple

to say so! But I want to ask you this! Why, in thunder, did you let Adrea what's-her-name, the dancing girl, come down here?"

"It was no business of mine! I did not know that she was coming!"

Captain Westover stroked his moustache and looked puzzled. "Look here, old man," he said slowly, "you go to see her in London, don't you?"

"I have been!"

"Just so! And you were down at the cottage last night, weren't you?"

"I was!"

"Well! hang it all, then you must have known something about her coming, you know! It can't be just a coincidence. Bevan & Bevan are my solicitors, and by the purest accident, one day I learned that Miss Adrea enjoys a settlement of a thousand a year from you. They didn't tell me, of course. I happened to catch sight of your check on the table one day, and overheard old Sam Bevan give some instructions to a clerk. Sorry, but I couldn't help it! You're the first person I've breathed it to."

"I am her guardian!" Paul exclaimed angrily.

Captain Westover whistled. "You may call it what you like, old fellow! I don't mind, I can assure you! You don't seem inclined to listen to any advice, so I

won't offer any more. But if you'll forgive my saying so, you're doing a d——d silly thing. Good-morning.

On the whole, Paul did not enjoy his day's hunting; and before it was all over, he found himself once more in an embarrassing situation. For as he rode past the gates of the cottage, on his way home, Adrea was there, breathless and laughing, with her dusky hair waving loosely around her shapely head.

"I saw you coming," she said, a little shyly, "and I was afraid that you would not stop, so I ran out as fast as I could. It was silly of me! You were coming in, weren't you?"

"I think not!" Paul answered gravely. "Look how thick in mud I am, and how tired my horse looks!"

She looked up at him with pleading eyes and parted lips. "Do come!" she said. "I have been expecting you all day!"

She held the gate open, and stood looking up at him, a curiously picturesque-looking figure in the grey twilight. Her gown was like no other woman's; it was something between a Greek robe and a tea-gown, of a dull orange hue, and her dusky hair was tied up with a bow of ribbon of the same colour. Everything about her was strange; even the faint perfume which hung about her clothes, and which brought him sudden,

swift memories of that moment when she had lain in his arms, and his lips had met hers. Paul felt the colour steal into his pale cheeks as he leaped to the ground, and passed his arm through his horse's bridle.

"I will come, *cara mia!*" he said softly.

She clasped her hands through his other arm, and whispered something in his ear, as they turned up the avenue together. Just then the sound of horses' hoofs in the road made them both turn round. Captain Westover and Lady May were riding by together, with their eyes fixed upon Paul and his companion.

## CHAPTER XIX.

"BLOOD CALLS ALOUD FOR BLOOD AND NOT FOR HANDS ENTWINED"

It was with a strange conflict of feelings that Paul, with Adrea by his side, passed across the square, low hall of the cottage, plentifully decorated with stags' heads and other sporting trophies, and into the drawing-room. It was a room which had been built, too, of quaint shape, made up of nooks and corners and recesses, and with dark oak beams stretching right across the ceiling. The furniture was all old-fashioned, and of different periods; but the general effect was harmonious, though a trifle shabby. Paul knew it well! Many an evening he had come in to tea there, after a cigar and a chat with the old Major, and lounged in that low chair by Mrs. Harcourt's side. But it scarcely seemed like the same room to him now. The Major and his wife had been old-fashioned people, and their personality, and talk, and surroundings, had created a sort of atmosphere which Paul had grown almost to associate with the place. He missed it directly he en-

tered the room. What it was that had worked the change it was hard to tell. Adrea had been far too charmed with its quaintness to seriously alter anything. A little stiffness in the arrangement of the furniture had been corrected, and the few antimacassars carefully removed; otherwise nothing had been changed. The great bowls of yellow roses and chrysanthemums, and the piles of modern books and music lying about, might have been partly responsible for it; and the faint perfume which he had grown to associate altogether with Adrea, and which seemed wafted into the air as she gathered up her skirts on her way into the room, had a foreign flavour in it. But, after all, it was Adrea herself who changed the atmosphere so completely. She was so different from other women in her strange Eastern beauty and the leopard-like grace of her movements that she could not fail to create an atmosphere around her. Yes! it was she herself who had worked the change; just as she had worked so wonderful a change in him, Paul told himself.

At first they had thought that the room was empty; and Adrea, who had entered a little in advance, turned round to Paul and held out her hands with a sudden sweeping gesture of invitation. Even in that moment, as he moved towards her, Paul had time to feel a quick glow of admiration at the artistic elegance of her pose

and colouring. Her proud, dusky face and brilliant eyes found a perfect background in the deep orange of her loose gown, and the velvet twined amongst her dark hair. Her arms, stretched out towards him, were half bare, where the lace had fallen back, and a world of passionate love and invitation was glowing in her face as she leaned slightly towards him, as if impatient of his slow advance. But before his hands had touched hers, a voice from the further end of the room had broken in upon that eloquent silence.

"Adrea! you did not see me!"

They stood for a moment as though paralysed; then Adrea turned slowly round with darkening face. "I did not! I thought that you were upstairs!"

She glided out of the shadows, a slim, tall figure dressed with curious simplicity, and with white, bloodless face. "I am going away," she said, coming quite close to them, and fixing her full, deep eyes upon Adrea; "I am going away at once. But, Adrea, there is one word—just one word—"

"Say it!" Adrea interrupted impatiently.

She glanced at Paul. He made a movement as though to quit the room, but Adrea prevented him. "You need not go!" she said. "Anything that is to be said can be said to you as well as to me. I prefer to have no secrets! You were going to say something to me," she added, turning to her companion.

"Yes! I have no objection to say it before Mr. de Vaux. I simply want to ask you whether you consider him a proper visitor in this house?"

"I choose it! I am mistress here!"

For a moment an angry reply seemed to quiver upon the woman's lips, but it died away.

"You are right! I thank you for reminding me of it," she said quietly. "And yet, Adrea, hear me! You are doing an evil thing! Was your father's murder so light a thing to you that you can join hands with his murderer's son? Remember that day! Think of your father lying across that chamber floor, stricken dead in a single moment by Martin de Vaux—by his father! It not seemly that you two should stand there, hand in hand! It is not seemly for you to be under the same roof! It is horrible!"

There was a moment's silence. Then Adrea threw open the door, and pointed to it.

"Go!" she ordered coldly. "You have had your say, and that is my answer! You were my father's friend; I believe that he loved you! It was for his sake that I offered you shelter! It was for his sake that I brought you here! But, remember this: if you wish to stay with me, let me never hear another word from you on this subject!"

She went out silently. Adrea closed the door, and

turned round with all the hardness fading swiftly out of her features. A moment before there had been a look of the tigress in her eyes; and Paul, watching her, had shuddered. It was gone now. She came close up to Paul, and led him to a chair.

"Was I very undignified?" she said, laughing. "I am afraid I was. I was very angry!"

He shook his head. "You were not undignified," he said, "but you were very severe. I think that she will go away."

Adrea's face hardened again. "I do not care! I would hate the dearest friend I had on earth who tried to come between us. Oh! Paul, Paul! don't you feel as I do; as though the world were empty, and my mind swept bare of memories,—as though there were no background to it all, nothing save you and I, and our love?"

Paul drew her to him. For him, at that moment, there was no past nor any future. The dreamy *abandon* of her manner seemed to have raised an echo within him.

"Listen! What is that?" Adrea exclaimed suddenly.

There was the ring of a horse's hoofs in the avenue, and immediately afterwards a loud peal at the bell. Paul and Adrea looked at one another breathlessly. Who could it be?

The outer door was opened and closed, and then quick steps passed across the hall. The drawing-room door was thrown open, and Arthur de Vaux, pale and splashed with mud from head to foot, stood upon the threshold.

## CHAPTER XX

### "THE NEW, STRONG WINE OF LOVE"

THE situation, although it was only a brief one, was for a moment possessed of a singularly dramatic force. The grouping and the colouring in that dimly lit drawing-room were all that an artist could desire, and the facial expressions bordered upon the tragic. Of all men in the world, his brother was the last whom of his own choosing Paul would have wished to see.

There was a brief silence. Arthur, breathless through his hasty entrance, could only stand there upon the threshold, his face white to the lips, and his eyes flashing with passionate anger and dismay. To him the situation was more than painful; it was horrible. To have believed ill of Paul from hearsay would have been impossible; his confidence in his elder brother had been unbounded. He had always looked up to him as the mirror of everything that was honorable and chivalrous. Even now, perhaps there might be some explanation—some partial explanation, at any rate. Paul was standing back amongst the shadows,

and his face was only barely visible. Doubtless it was only surprise which held him silent. In a moment he would speak, and explain everything. It was this thought which loosened Arthur's tongue.

"Paul," he cried, and stepping forward into the room, "and Adrea! You here, and together! Tell me what it meams! I have a right to know. I will know."

He had determined to be cool, to bear himself like a man, but their silence maddened him. Adrea, it is true, showed no signs of guilt or confusion in her cold, questioning face. But the deceit, if deceit there had been, was not hers. It was Paul who was responsible to him, and it was Paul who should have spoken—Paul, who stood there with a hidden face, a silent, immovable figure.

"Are you stricken dumb?" he cried angrily. "You can see who I am, can't you, Paul? Speak to me! Tell me whether there is any truth in these stories which are flying about the county, with no one to contradict them."

What might have been the tragedy of the situation vanished for Paul at the sound of his brother's words. After all, it was not the just anger of a deceived man with which he was confronted, but the empty scream of a boy's passion. Arthur's infatuation had but skimmed

the surface of his light nature. He was pricked, not wounded. Yet, though in a sense this realization brought its relief, Paul felt humbled into the dust. He was actually conscious of his own humiliation. So far as a nature such as his could be conventional, he had become so in deference to the opinion of those who looked up to him as the head of a great house, and of whom much was to be expected, both socially and politically. What must become of that opinion now, Arthur's words too plainly foreshadowed.

He moved forward into the centre of the room, and faced his brother. There was only a small table between them.

"I do not know who sent you here, Arthur," he said, "or what reports you have heard, but it seems to me, that any explanation you may wish had better be deferred until our return home."

Arthur struck the table violently with his riding-whip, "I will not wait!" he cried. "Here is the proper place! I have been deceived and cajoled by—by—you, Adrea, and by my own brother! It is shameful! You hypocrite, Paul! You, to come up to London, and solemnly lecture me about a dancing girl. You d——d hypocrite!"

Before his passion, Paul's grave and steadfast silence gained an added dignity. Adrea, with a red spot burning on her cheeks, sailed between the two.

"Arthur, you are mad," she said, turning suddenly upon him, with her eyes afire. "Have I ever deceived you? Have I ever pretended to care for you? Bah, no! You are only an unformed, hysterical boy. Before, you were indifferent to me. Now, I am very quickly growing to hate you! Begone! Leave this house!"

He stood quite still, white and trembling. The scorn of her words had fallen like ice upon his heart. Then he turned, and groped for the door, as though there were a mist before his eyes.

"I suppose you are quite right," he faltered out. "I didn't see it quite the same way, that's all. I understand now."

The door opened and shut. In a moment or two the sound of his horse's hoofs were heard in the avenue, growing rapidly less distinct as he galloped away into the darkness. To Paul it sounded like the knell of his self-respect, but Adrea felt only the relief. Her eyes, full of soft invitation, sought his; but he did not move. He stood there, silent and motionless, with his face turned towards the window. Those dying sounds meant so much to him,—so much that she could never understand.

The consciousness of her near presence suddenly disturbed him. He turned round. Her warm breath

was upon his cheek, and her white arms were twined about his neck.

"Paul," she whispered, "do not look so miserable, please! Come and talk to me."

Her arms tightened around him. He looked down at her with a peculiar helplessness. Their light weight seemed to him like a chain of iron weighing him down! down! down!

He had told himself that he had come to bid her farewell; that Father Adrian's words, vague though they were, yet had a definite meaning, and were worthy of his regard. But at that moment their memory was like a dying echo in his ears. This first passion of his life was strong upon him, and everything else was weak. The future was suddenly bounded for him by a pair of white, clinging arms, and a dark, beautiful face pressed close to his. He saw no more; he could see no further.

## CHAPTER XXI

### "ADREA'S DIARY"

"By love stalks hate, his brother and his mate."

I AM scarcely calm enough to write! Yet I must write! My heart is full; my very pulses are throbbing with excitement! What is it that has happened? It is all confused in my mind. Let me try and set it down clearly; then perhaps I shall be able to see my way.

Yesterday it seemed to me that my being was all too small for one passion. Now it holds two! The one, perhaps, intensifies the other. That is possible, for they are opposites, and one has grown out of the other. Now I cannot tell which is the stronger, the love or the hate.

I love one man, and I hate another. Perhaps I should say I love one man because I hate another. You, my dumb confidant, may be trusted with names, so I will be clearer still. I love Paul de Vaux, and I hate Father Adrian!

Oh! that he should have dared! that he should have

dared to speak so to me! If only Paul had been there, he should have beaten him. If I had had the strength and the means, I would have killed him where he stood, and silenced those thin, cruel lips for ever. I could have stabbed him to the heart, and my hand would never have faltered.

Let me try to recall that scene. It is not difficult. His words are ringing still in my ears, and his white, passionate face seems to follow and mock me wherever I look. I see it out there in the white moonlight, and it rises up from the dark corners of the room. It haunts me, and I hate it! I hate him as a woman hates any one who comes between her and the man she loves!

We were alone, Paul and I; at least, we thought so. I had heard no one enter, nor had he. But suddenly a voice rang out and filled the room; a fierce, cruel voice, so changed and hardened with passion that I scarcely recognised it. But when we sprang up, and peered through the twilight of the chamber we saw him standing close to us,—so close that he might even have heard our whispered words to one another.

There had been some ceremony at the monastery amongst the hills where most of his time here is spent, and he had evidently come straight from there. His flowing black robes were splashed with mud and torn by brambles, and his white face was livid with exhaust-

ion and anger. His dark eyes burned like fire in their hollow depths, and his right hand was raised above his head, as though he had been on the point of striking or denouncing us. I shall not forget his appearance while I live. It will haunt me to my dying day.

I think that it is the mystery of it all which tortures me so. What has Paul to fear from him? Whence comes his power? What evil is it which he holds suspended over his head? There is only one that I can imagine. Father Adrian must hold the key to that awful deathbed scene at the monastry of Cruta. As I write the words, my hand shakes, my heart sickens with the horror of that memory. Well have I cause to shrink from all thought of that hideous night;—I, to whom the son of Martin de Vaux has become the dearest amongst men! What was it Paul said to me? "He knows something which my father told him whilst he lay dying." Is it that knowledge which gives him this strange power? I did not believe in it! I would not have believed in it! But, in that dreadful moment, I turned to Paul, and I saw his face!

A volley of words seemed trembling on Father Adrian's lips; yet he did not speak. We waited for the storm to burst; we waited till I could bear the silence no longer, and I felt that if it was not broken I should go mad. So I drew near to him, and spoke a

single word in his ear. Then I glided back to Paul's side.

"Spy!"

He treated the insult as one might treat the bite of an insect in the face of some imminent danger. He did not reply to it; he did not appear to have heard it. His eyes traveled over me, as though they had been sightless, and challenged Paul's. In the excitement of the moment, his words sounded tame, and almost meaningless.

"This is your answer, then, Paul de Vaux! Let it be so! I accept your decision!"

There was no defiance in Paul's answer. His manner was quite subdued. I think that both his words and his tone surprised me.

"You have seen! I am in your hands!"

I looked from one to the other, troubled. I felt that there was a hidden meaning in their words which I could not understand. There was something between them from which I was excluded. But this much I knew. There was a threat in Father Adrian's words, and it was I who was the cause of it. Oh! if this man should bring evil upon Paul! The thought of it is like madness to me! See, there goes my pen! I cannot write when I think of it!

I have opened my window. The very air is sad with

the moaning of the sea, and the rustling of the night breeze in the thick, tangled shrubbery below. But to me it is sweet and grateful! I am in no mood for pleasant sounds or sights. The dreariness of the night finds its echo in my heart. The damp breeze cools my forehead! To-night I feel conscious of a new strength. It is the strength of hate! My mind is full of dim purposes; time will aid them to gather strength! As they group themselves together, action will suggest itself. To time I leave them!

Let me go back to my recital of what passed between us three. A strange lethargic calm seemed to have fallen upon Paul. He turned to me without even a single trace of the passion which had lit up his face a few moments before.

"I must go!" he said quietly. "Farewell!"

I could scarcely believe that he meant it; that he was going away without another word, at what was really this priest's unspoken bidding. But it was so. From that moment, the fear of Father Adrian which had grown up in my heart leaped into a new strength. I was angry, and full of resistance.

"Why should you go?" I cried. "I have much to say to you!"

"I must go now, Adrea," he answered simply. "When I came I had no thought of staying. It is late!"

I felt my face grow hot with passion as I turned swiftly round towards Father Adrian. "It is you who should go," I cried. "Why have you come here? Why are you always creeping across my life like a dark, noisome shadow? Go away! Begone! I will not be left with you!"

He turned a shade paler, but he did not sacrifice his dignity, as I hoped that he would, by answering me with anger. He did not even answer me at all. He looked over my head at my lover.

"To-morrow night!" he said calmly.

"To-morrow night!" Paul answered.

I stood between them, angry but helpless. A log of wood had just fallen from the fire on to the hearth, and in its sudden blaze I could see their faces distinctly. The utter contrast between the two men threw each into strong relief. Paul, in his scarlet coat and riding clothes, pale and impassive, but *débonnaire*; and Father Adrian, his strange black garb mud-bespattered and disordered, and his dark, angry face livid with the passion so hardly suppressed. It was odd to think of them as creatures of the same species. Odder still to think that there should be this link between them.

I walked with Paul to the door, holding to his arm, and talking, half-gaily, half-reproachfully, all the way. We stood on the step together while his horse was be-

ing brought round, and in the half-lights he stooped down and kissed me. But his manner had changed. Even his lips were cold, and his eyes were no longer bright. There was a far-away look in them, and his face was white and set. There were tears in my eyes as I watched him ride away on his great brown horse, and listened to the distant thunder of hoofs across the moor. His face had told its own story. He was nerving himself to face some expected danger. From whose hands? Surely from Father Adrian's.

The thought worked within me. I stood for a moment, trying to quiet my passion. As I turned away I heard the stable-yard doors open, and a carriage, laden with luggage, drove slowly out, and, without coming to the front at all, turned down the avenue. I ran out, heedless of my slippers, and called to it to stop. The man obeyed me, and I caught it up, breathless. The blinds were closely drawn, but I opened the door. As I expected, it was she who sat inside, closely veiled and weeping.

"You were going, then, without a single word of farewell!" I cried reproachfully. "Is that kind? Have I deserved it from you?"

She threw up her veil. Her eyes were red and swollen with weeping. She looked at me pleadingly.

"Do not blame me more than you can help!" she

said. "It was a eat shock to me to see you—with the son of Martin de Vaux. It was more than a shock; it was a horror to me! He is like his father! He is very like his father!"

I knew that she had passed through a fiery sea of suffering, and I kept back the anger which threatened me. I pointed upwards.

"We cannot keep the dark clouds from gathering in the sky, nor can we make love come and go at our bidding. We are but creatures; it is fate which ordains!"

She bowed her head. "Fate, or the unknown God! I am not your judge, child! I do not leave you in anger!"

"Why do you go, then, and leave me here alone? It is not kind! It is not what I should expect from you!"

The tears started again into her eyes, but she shook them away. "I cannot explain as yet," she said. "You will think me ungrateful, I fear! I cannot help it! I must go. Farewell, Adrea!"

A sudden thought came to me. It was an inspiration. "You are not going of your own free will," I cried. "Some one has been influencing you!"

Her face was suddenly full of nervous terror. "Hush! hush!" she cried. "He will hear you! Let me go now! Let me go, I beseech you!"

I held her hands, "It is Father Adrian who is sending you away," I cried passionately. "He is my enemy. I hate him! Why should you obey him? Stay with me! Do, do stay!"

She looked at me as one would look at an ignorant child who blasphemes. "You are talking wildly! Father Adrian is far from being your enemy. You do not understand!"

Her voice had changed; the note of sympathy had died away. I turned away from the carriage door in despair. Father Adrian's power was greater than mine.

"You can go!" I said bitterly. "You would have left me here without one word, at his bidding. As you say, I do not understand."

She leaned forward, with a strange light in her eyes. "Child," she whispered, "I am going to Cruta."

The carriage drove away and I walked back to the house. The air seemed full of voices, and the grey rising mists loomed into strange shapes. Cruta! She was going to Cruta! What power had this man in his hands to send my lover from me with a heart like a stone, and this woman back into the living hell from which she had just freed herself. It was my turn now! Would he be able to subdue me to his bidding? The thought made me shudder.

I ran upstairs into my room, and bathed my fore-

head, and re-arranged my gown. Then I set my teeth together, and went down to him. It was to be a battle! Well! I was prepared!

* * * *

It is over now. I know his strength, and I know his weakness. What passed between us I shall put down to-morrow. To-night I am weary.

## CHAPTER XXII

### "OH! HEART OF STONE, YET FLESH TO ALL SAVE ME"

"THIS is exactly what happened after I regained the house. I went upstairs for a few minutes to arrange my hair and bathe my eyes. Then I walked straight down to the drawing-room, and I told myself that I was prepared for anything that might take place.

Father Adrian did not hear me enter, so I had the advantage at the onset of taking him by surprise. He was standing in the centre of the hearthrug, with his arms folded and his eyes cast down upon the ground. His eyebrows almost met in a black frown, and a curious grey pallor had spread itself over his face. When I entered, noiselessly moving the curtains, from the outer chamber, he was muttering to himself, and I strained my hearing to catch the meaning of his words.

"To-night must end it!" I heard him say. "She herself shall decide. Greater men have travelled the path before me! As for him, my pity has grown faint!

It is the will of the Church! I myself am but the instrument. He stands between the Church and her rights! Between me and—her!"

His cheeks flushed, and his expression suddenly changed. He whispered a name! It was mine! His eyes were soft, and his lips were parted. The priest had vanished. His face was human and manly. I saw it, but my heart was as cold as steel.

"Father Adrian," I said quietly, "I am here."

He started, and looked towards me. If my heart could have been softened even to pity, it would have been softened by that look. But a woman's great selfishness was upon me! The man I loved was in some sort of danger at his hands. There was no room in my heart for any other thought. I was adamant.

He was silent for a moment, then he faced me steadily, and spoke. "So you have learned to love this Englishman, this De Vaux, the son of old Martin de Vaux! Answer me simply, Yes or No!"

"I have!"

I did not hesitate. What need was there for hesitation? I answered him defiantly, and without faltering.

"You will never marry him! You will not even become his mistress!"

I made no answer at first; I laughed! that was all.

"Who will prevent me?"

"I shall!"

"How?"

"The means are ready to my hand!"

My heart sank, but I forced a smile. "What are they?"

He considered a moment. "I can strip Paul de Vaux of every acre and every penny he possesses! I can break his mother's heart! I can proclaim his father a murderer!"

"I do not understand! I do not believe!"

The words left me boldly enough, but there was a lump in my throat, and my heart was sick.

"Listen!" He drew a small gold crucifix from his breast, and solemnly kissed it. Then, holding it in his hand, he repeated,—

"I can beggar Paul de Vaux by my proven word. I can take from him everything precious in life! I can take from him his name and his honours! I can break his mother's heart! I can proclaim his father a murderer! All this I can and will do, save you listen to me!"

He kissed the crucifix, and replaced it in his inner pocket. I had begun to tremble. The stamp of truth was upon his words. Still I tried to face him boldly.

"Even if this is so, what has it to do with me?" I cried.

"You know!" he answered. "In your heart you know! Yet, if you will—listen!" he continued, in a low tone. "You love Paul de Vaux!"

"It is true!"

"And you believe that he loves you?"

"I do!"

"Listen, then!" Three nights ago I lifted that curtain, by the side of one who has left you for ever, and I saw you in his arms. I followed him out of the house; I walked by his side to Vaux Abbey, and I told him what I have told you. I wasted no time in idle threats. I told him what power was mine, and I said 'Choose!' He was silent!"

"Choose between what?" I interrupted.

"I bade him swear that he would never willingly look upon your face again, or prepare himself to face all the evils which it was in my power to bring upon him."

"And he?"

"He asked for time—for a week!"

A storm of anger was suddenly stirred up within me. I turned upon him with flashing eyes and quivering lips. Discretion and restraint were gone; I was like a tigress. I lacked only the power to kill.

"And by what right did you dare to thrust yourself between us?" I cried. "What have I to do with you, or you with me?"

He held up his hands for a moment, as though to shut out the sight of my face, ablaze with scorn and hatred. There was a short silence. Then he spoke in a low tone, vibrating with intensity of feeling.

"You know! In your heart you know!" he said. "Into my life has come the greatest humiliation which can befall such as I am! In sorrow and bitterness it has eaten itself into my heart. I am accursed in my own sight, and in the sight of God!"

I mocked at him. "I am not your confessor!" I laughed. "Go and tell your sins to those of your own order! I am a woman and you are a priest! Why do you look at me with that light in your eyes? Am I a prayer-book? Is there anything saintly in my face, that you should keep your eyes fixed upon it so steadily?"

I had hoped that my words would madden him, and he would lose his self-control. To my surprise, they had but little effect. He seemed scarcely to have heard.

"What have you to do with me, or I with you?" he repeated, in a voice which was rapidly gaining strength and passion. "God knows! Yet as surely as we both

live, our lots are intertwined the one with the other."

"A godly priest!" I laughed. "What have you to do with me? What of your vows? Oh, how dare you try to play the lover with me! You hypocrite!"

He shrank back as though in pain. I laughed outright, glad that I had made him feel.

"Adrea!" he said slowly. "I was never a hypocrite to you. In your presence I have never breathed a word of my religion. Think for a moment of those days at Cruta. Did I not refuse to confess you? Why? You know! Because of those long, dreamy days we spent together, not as priest and penitent, but as man and woman. Do you remember them—the cliffs, with their giant shadows standing out across the blue waters of the harbour; the hollows, where we sat amongst the perfumed wild flowers, gazing across the sea, and watching the white sails in the distance; the nights, with their white moonlight and silent grandeur! Ay, Adrea! look me in the face, if you can, and tell me that you have forgotten them! You cannot! You dare not! It was you who brought me those books of wild, passionate poetry whose music entered into my very soul! It was you who tempted me with soft words, with your music, with your beauty, into that world of sense which holds me prisoner for ever. What I once was, I can never be again! It is you who worked the change—you who

awoke my man's heart, and set it beating for ever at your touch, at your movements, at the sight of you. It is you who taught me how to love—who opened to me the rose-covered gates of hell! There is no drawing back! You, who have dragged me down, shall share my fall with me, for better or for worse! You shall not escape! No other man shall have you! I have paid the price, and I will have you!"

I wrenched myself free from the arms which were closing around me, and stood trembling before him.

"Fool!" I cried. "You have dared to think of me like that because I chose to make use of you at Cruta! Make use of you! Yes, that is what I did! I wanted to escape! You and she were the only ones who could help me! Save for that, I had never wasted a moment upon you. I never thought of you as a man; you were only a priest. I never wished to see you again! You are in my way now; you stand between me and the man I love! I hate you!"

His dark eyes were lit up with a sudden fire and a deep flush stained his cheeks. For the first time I seemed to see the man in him as well as the priest, and I saw that he was handsome. It did not interest me; I noticed it only as an incident.

"I do not believe it!" he exclaimed. "You are not so false as you would have me believe, Adrea!"

His hand was on my wrist, and his dark eyes, strangely softened, were fixed pleadingly upon mine. Something in his manner, even in his tone, seemed to remind me of Paul. I was magnetized! For a moment I could not move, and during that moment his hands closed upon mine.

"Adrea, is such a love as I can offer you worth nothing? What did you tell me once was your life's ideal? Was it not the love of a strong, true man, always faithful, always loving? No one could love you more tenderly than I, no one could be more faithful. Until I saw you, no woman's face had dwelt in my thoughts for a single instant. In my heart you reign alone, Adrea! No one has been there before—no one will come after! Such as it is, it is a kingdom of your own!"

"I do not understand you," I said slowly, withdrawing my hands. "You talk to me of a man's love, a man's faithfulness! What do you know of it? You are a priest!"

He threw up his hands with a sudden cry of agony. His face was white and blanched.

"Do I not know it?" he exclaimed in a low, fierce tone. "Do you think I yielded easily to the poisoned web you have woven around me? The horror of it all has darkened my days, and made hideous my nights. And yet you can taunt me with it—you, for whom I

yield up conscience and future—you, for whom I give my soul! No other man could love as I love, Adrea!"

I looked him straight in the face and I did not spare him. What was the use? The truth was best!

"It is folly!" I said. "If your religion is worth anything to you, let it help you now! Let it teach you to forget me! Go away from here, and leave unharmed the man I love. If you do not, I shall hate you!"

He caught hold of my dress. He was on his knees before me—a bent, imploring figure.

"Too late! too late!" he cried. "My religion has gone! When love for you crept into my heart, I became worse than a heretic. It was sin, and the sin has spread. Oh! have mercy upon me, Adrea, have mercy upon me! Just a little of your love. It may not be much at first, but it will grow. Adrea, you must try—you shall try!"

I shook my gown from his trembling fingers, and looked down upon him with contempt in my heart, and contempt in my face. The flickering firelight cast a faint glow upon his blanched, wan features, and their utter humility filled me with an unreasoning and unreasonable loathing. I did not try to soften my words. I spoke out just as I felt, and watched him rise slowly to his feet, like a hunted and stricken animal, without

a pitying word or glance. As he rose upright, his head dropped. He did not look at me; he did not speak a single word. He walked slowly to the door with steps that faltered a little, and walked out of the room, and out of the house.

I watched him down the avenue, wondering at his strange silence. It had a curious effect upon me. I would rather have heard threats—even a torrent of anger. There was something curiously ominous in that slow, wordless exit. I watched him uneasily, full of dim, shapeless fears.

Outside the gate he paused in the middle of the road. To the left was the monastery where he had stayed; to the right was Vaux Abbey. I heard my heart beat while he paused, and my face was pressed against the window. For nearly a minute he stood quite still, with downcast head, thinking. Then he turned deliberately to the right, and set his face towards Vaux Abbey.

* * * * *

That was early in the evening yesterday—twenty-four hours ago. Since then not a soul has been near the house. Early this morning I saw Father Adrian coming along the road from Vaux. I ran upstairs, and locked myself in my room, after forbidding the servants to let him enter. From the windows I

watched him. To my surprise he never even glanced in. He walked past the gates, and took the road to the monastery. I saw him slowly ascend the hill and vanish out of sight in the darkening twilight. Once, just before he reached the summit, he paused and looked steadily down here. I could not see his face, but I saw him raise his right hand for a moment toward the sky. Then he turned round and pursued his way.

* * * * *

If some one does not come to me soon, I shall go mad. Another hour has passed. My mind is made up; I shall go to Vaux Abbey.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### "MY LIPS ARE CHARGED WITH TRUTH, AND JUSTICE BIDS ME SPEAK"

An early darkness had fallen upon the earth. Black clouds had sailed across the young moon, and the evening breeze had changed into a gale. There was no rain as yet, but every prospect of it near at hand. A mass of lurid, yellowish clouds hung low down over the bending woods, and the wind whistled drearily amongst the fir trees. Paul de Vaux wrapped his cloak tightly around him, and, standing on the turf-covered floor of the ruined chapel, peered forward into the darkness, looking for the man whom he had come to meet. Even then he heard his voice before he could distinguish the dim outline of Father Adrian standing by his side.

"So you have come, Paul de Vaux, and in good time! It is well!"

"I am here!" Paul answered shortly. "If what you have to say to me will take long, come up to the house. It is dark and cold, and there is a storm rising."

The priest shook his head. "I have no wish to find shelter under the roof of Vaux Abbey," he said coldly. "You are well protected against the weather, and so am I. Let us stay here!"

Paul strove to look into his face, but the darkness baffled him. He could only see its outline, nothing of his expression. "As you will," he answered. "Speak! I am ready."

"I have dealt in no idle threats, Paul de Vaux," was the stern answer. "I gave you a chance, and you have thrown it away. Perhaps I did ill ever to offer it to you. But, at any rate, remember this: it is no idle vengeance which I am dealing out to you this night; it is our holy and despoiled Church calling for justice. I speak in her name!"

There was a moment's silence. Paul knew by his companion's bowed head and laboured utterance that he was suffering from some sort of emotion. But the darkness hid from him the workings of his pale features. When he spoke, his voice was low and solemn.

"Paul de Vaux, turn back in your mind to another night such as this, when the thunder of sea and wind shook the air, and the anger of God seemed fallen upon the earth. On that night your father lay dying in the island monastery of Cruta; and while you were risking your life in the storm to reach him, I knelt by his side

praying for his soul, that it might not sink down amongst the damned in hell. He was a brave man, but with the icy hand of death closing around him fear touched his heart. It was no craven fear! He lay there still and quiet, but his heart was troubled. In the midst of my prayers he stopped me, and took the crucifix into his own hand.

"'Father,' he said, 'I have no faith in dying repentances. I have scouted religion all my life, and on my deathbed I will not cry for comfort to a Divinity which is a myth to me. Yet, as man to man, listen while I tell you a secret; and when I have finished, do you pray for me.'

"Shall I go on, Paul de Vaux? Shall I tell you all that your father's dying lips faltered out to me?"

"All! every word! Keep nothing back!" Paul spoke quickly, almost feverishly. He knew a little, but something told him that this priest knew more. He began dimly to suspect the nature of the revelation which was to come.

"You shall know everything," Father Adrian continued, in the same hushed tone, so low that Paul had to bend forward to catch the words as they fell from his lips. "If Martin de Vaux had been of our religion, and had sought me as a priest of the Church a seal would have been set upon my mouth. But it

was not so! Despite all my ministrations, he died as he had lived, in heresy and grievous sin. After all, it is only right that you, his son, should know what he forebore to tell you. Yet, in my weakness I might have spared you, if you yourself had not brought down this blow upon your head."

Paul raised his hand, and Father Adrian paused. "Listen," he said, in a low, deep tone. "There are secret pages in the lives of most of us—pages blurred and scarred with misery and suffering and sin. But there is a difference—a great difference. Some are turned over with firm and penitent fingers, and, although their scarlet record may never be blotted out, yet, by sacrifice and atonement, the fruits of the sin itself may die, and, dying, cast no shadow into the future. A sin against humanity can often be righted by human justice. Towards the close of my father's days, I knew for the first time that there was in his life one of those disfigured pages. He told me nothing. I sought to know nothing. Father Adrian," Paul went on, with a sudden strain of passion in his tone, and a gesture half unseen in the darkness, "if the shadow of his sin rests upon any human being, if it still lives upon the earth, then tell me all that is in your heart to tell, for there is work to be done. But if that page be locked and

sealed, if those who suffered through it are dead, and the burden which darkened my father's days is his alone, then spare his memory! Strike at me, if you will! Deal out your promised vengeance, but let it fall on me alone!"

Paul ended his speech with a little burst of passion ringing in those last few words. He was conscious of a deep and fervent desire to hear nothing, to listen to nothing, which could teach him to hold less dear his father's memory. He shrank, with a human and perfectly natural feeling, from hearing evil of the dead. That last evil deed, the murder in that grim, bare chamber of death, had haunted him with vivid and painful intensity. But it was a crime by itself. It was horrible to imagine that it might indeed be the culmination of a life of license and contempt of all human laws. He had tried to think of it as something outside his father's life, something done in a momentary fit of madness, and that the man who suffered by it was some monster unfit for the companionship of his fellows—unfit to live. There were still tales to be heard in the county, and about town even, of the wild doings of Martin de Vaux in his younger days; but none of these had reached his son's ears. He would have been the last person likely to hear of them.

There was a short silence, and before Father Adrian spoke again the low-lying clouds were swept over their heads by a gale from seaward, and the wind commenced to whistle and shriek in the pine wood, and roar amongst the crumbling ruins, which scarcely afforded them protection from the blinding rain. Any further conversation was impossible. Paul lifted up his voice, and shouted in his companion's ear—

"These walls are not safe! We must go into the house. Will you come?"

Father Adrian hesitated, and then assented, wrapping his cloak around him. In a few moments they were inside the library, having entered through a private door and met no one. Breathless, Paul threw off his cloak, which was dripping with rain, and turned round almost fiercely upon his companion.

"Now speak!" he said. "I am ready to hear all."

The priest looked at him steadily for a moment, and then, with his pale face turned towards the fire, he commenced to speak.

"Sin is everlasting!" he said slowly. "Your father's sin lives, and on you the burden must fall! If you had kept the covenant which I placed before you, I might have spared you. You yourself have chosen. You must hear all! Listen!

"It was by chance that I was spending two months

in charge of the monastery of St. Jerome, at Cruta, when your father arrived," he continued, without any pause. "He sought our hospitality and he at once obtained it. For two days he dwelt with us, spending his time for the most part in idle fashion, wandering about along the seashore or on the cliffs, but always with the look on his face of a man who does but dally with some fixed purpose. His doings were nothing to me, but by chance, from one of the brethren, I learnt that he was no stranger to the island—that once, many years ago, he had been the guest of the lord who ruled the little territory, and whose castle overshadows the monastery.

"On the third day of his stay, he remained within his guest-chamber until sundown, writing. As the vesper-bell rang I met him in the corridor, dressed for walking, and from his countenance I judged that whatever his mission to the island might be, he was about to bring it to an end. He passed me without speech, almost as though he had not seen me, and left the monastery. A few minutes afterwards, looking down from the windows to watch the brethren come in from their field tasks, I saw him take the road up to the castle.

"It was in the middle of the night when he returned. Midnight had come and gone, and every one in the monastery was asleep, when the hoarse, clanging

bell down in the yard rang slightly, as though pulled by feeble fingers. I threw my cloak over my shoulders, and descended to admit him. When the last of the huge bolts had been withdrawn, and I threw the door open, I found him leaning against the wall, with his fingers clutched together in agony, and his bloodless features convulsed with pain. The moonlight was falling right across his face, pale and ghastly with pain, and by its light I seemed to see something dark dropping from him on the white flags. I leaned forward, horror-stricken, and I saw that it was blood."

"My God!"

Paul was standing very still and rigid, with his eyes fastened upon the priest. As yet, he scarcely realized anything more than that he was being told a very horrible story. But he was conscious of a feverish impatience, quite beyond his control. When Father Adrian paused at his exclamation, he beat the ground with his foot impatiently. "Go on! Go on!" he said hoarsely.

"I had no time to ask questions," the priest continued quietly. "Directly he left the support of the wall, and endeavoured to move towards me, your father threw up his arms with a sharp cry of pain, and almost fell upon his face. I was just in time to catch him, and exerting all my strength—for he was a powerful man—I dragged him up the steps and along the corri-

dor to the nearest empty cell. There I laid him down upon a bed of ferns, and then hurried out to summon one of the brethren who was skilled in medicine.

"In a few moments he returned with me. By his direction, I gave your father brandy and other restoratives, while he cut open his coat to find out, if he could, the nature of the wound. It was easily discovered. He had been stabbed by a long dagger just below the heart. Had the dagger entered one-sixteenth of an inch higher, he must have bled to death upon the spot.

"We bound up the hurt as well as we could, and with the help of other of the monks, we carried him up to the guest-chamber, and put him to bed. In about half an hour he recovered consciousness, and called me to his side.

"'Pencil, paper,' he whispered.

"I handed him both. After several futile efforts he succeeded in writing a few words. Then he folded up the note, and handed it to me.

"'If you will send it without delay,' he whispered, 'I will give one hundred pounds to the monastery.'

"I never hesitated, for our funds were in a desperate state; but first I glanced at the direction. It was addressd to—

PAUL DE VAUX, Esq.,
c/o The English Consul,
Palermo.

"I promised that it should be sent, and, as you know, it was. Then I sent the others out of the room, and inquired about his hurt. He set his lips firm, and shook his head.

"'It was an accident,' he faltered. 'No one was to blame.'

"I told him briefly that it was impossible. The nature of his wound was such that it was clearly the work of an assassin. In a certain sense we were the upholders of the law on the island, and I pointed this out to him sternly. He only shook his head and closed his eyes. Neither then nor at any other time could I gain from him one single word as to his doings on that night. He would tell me nothing."

"You saw him going toward the castle," Paul interrupted. "Did you make inquiries there?"

The priest shook his head slowly. "No, I made no inquiries," he answered. "It was no matter for my interference. The castle, although it is a huge place, was deserted save for a few native servants, whose *patois* was unintelligible to me. There were only two who dwelt there—the old Count himself, and one other—to whom I could have gone. Several nights after your father's illness I left the monastery, and tried to see the Count. He would not even have me admitted, and on my return, your father, who had guessed the reason of my absence, sent for me. He judged of the ill suc-

cess of my mission, by my face, and he instantly appeared relieved. He then called me to the bedside, and made me an offer. He would give me, as a further contribution to our exhausted funds, a large sum of money on this condition—that I took no further steps in any direction towards ascertaining the nature of his accident, as he chose to call it, and that I should not mention it to you as the cause of his illness, or refer to it in any way if you arrived while he was there. I hesitated for some time, but in the end I consented. The money in itself was a great temptation—you see, I am frank with you—and, apart from that, your father at that time was on the verge of his fever, and at such a critical time I feared the ill results of not falling in with his wishes. So I promised, and I kept my promise; no one—not even you—knew that he died from that dagger thrust, and during the remainder of my stay on the island, I asked no questions concerning his visit to the castle."

"But did you hear nothing? were there no reports?" Paul asked.

Father Adrian hesitated. "There were no reports about your father," he said, "but the castle itself was always the object of the most unbounded superstition on the part of the inhabitants. They told strange tales of midnight cries, of lights from blocked-up chambers, and of the old Count who still dwelt there, although he

had not been seen outside the castle walls for many a year. He was reported to have sold himself to the Evil One, and at the very mention of his name the people crossed themselves in terror, and glanced uneasily over their shoulders."

"Idle tales!" cried Paul angrily. "Tell me, Father Adrian, did you know this Count of Cruta?"

There was a moment's silence. Father Adrian's face was turned away, and he seemed in no hurry to answer. "Yes, I knew him."

"You knew him! What is he like? Tell me!"

The priest shook his head. "I have nothing to tell you," he said in a low tone.

"You mean that you will not tell me."

The priest inclined his head. Paul turned upon him fiercely, "He was my father's murderer," he cried.

"It may be so. But remember that nothing is known! Remember, too, that your father's last wish was to keep secret the manner of his death!"

Paul seemed scarcely to have heard him. He was walking restlessly up and down the apartment. Presently he stopped in front of Father Adrian's chair.

"You have told me what happened to my father on the island," he said; "now tell me the story of his life, which you say that he confided to you. I must know what took him there."

## CHAPTER XXIV

### "THE SHATTERED VASE OF LOVE'S MOST HOLY VOWS"

PAUL had not thought of ringing for lights, and, save around the fireplace, the room was wrapped in solemn darkness. Father Adrian's chair had been amongst the shadows, and Paul had seen nothing save his outline since they had entered the room. But now, his curiosity stirred by the sudden silence of the priest, he caught up the poker, and broke the burning log in the grate, so that the flames threw a quick light on his face.

Its extreme pallor struck him forcibly. It was a perfectly bloodless face, and the dark eyes, as black as jet, accentuated its pallor. Yet there was no lack of nervous strength or emotion. The thin lips were quivering, and the eyes were soft with feeling. Somehow, it seemed to Paul that this man's interest in the story which he had come to tell was no casual one; that he himself was mixed up in it, in a manner which as yet he had chosen to conceal. His colourless face was alight with human interest and sympathies. Who was

this priest, and why had he come so far to tell his story? Paul felt that a mystery lay behind it all.

"You must not think," Father Adrian commenced slowly, "that your father told me the whole history of his life. It was one episode only, the memory of which weighed heavily upon him as death drew near. He did not tell me all concerning it; what he did tell me I will try and repeat to you.

"It was late in the afternoon of the day before your arrival that he called me to his bedside. Only a few hours ago we had told him that he must die, and since then he had been very silent. I came and knelt before him, and was commencing a prayer, when he stopped me.

"'I want you to listen while I tell you one of the worst actions of my life,' he said in a low tone, weakened by the suffering through which he had passed. 'The memory of it has haunted me always; it is the memory of it which has brought me here. I am not confessing to you, mind! only after I have told you this story, I want you to pray for me.

"'Thirty years ago I was in Palermo, and was introduced there to the Count of Cruta. We met several times, and on his departure he invited me to come over here for a week's shooting. I was wandering about on pleasure, with no fixed plans, and I did not hesitate for

a moment. I should like nothing better than to come, I told him, and accordingly we returned here together.

"'The Count was a widower with one daughter, Irene. For a young man I was not particularly impressionable, and up till then I had thought very little about women. Nevertheless,—perhaps, I should say, all the more for that reason,—I fell in love with Irene. In a week's time I had all but told her so; and finding myself alone with her father one night after dinner, I boldly asked him for her hand. Somewhat to my surprise,—for considering the difference in our years, we had become very friendly,—he refused me point-blank. The first reason which he gave staggered me: Irene was already engaged to a Roumanian nobleman, who would be coming soon to claim her. But apart from that, he went on, he would never have consented to the match on the score of our different religions. I tried to argue with him, but it was useless; he would not even discuss the matter. His daughter's hand was promised, and his word was passed.

"'On the morrow I appealed to Irene, and here I met with more success. She confessed that she loved me, and, to my surprise, she consented at once when I proposed that she should run away with me. Our arrangements were made in haste and secrecy. My yacht lay in the harbour, and at midnight Irene stole

down to the shore, where I met her, and rowed her on board. A few minutes later we weighed anchor and steamed away, with the rusty old guns from the castle firing useless shots high over our heads.

"'I want to make my story as short as I can, so I will not attempt to offer any excuses for my conduct, or to seek to palliate it in any way. Irene had trusted herself to me, and I betrayed her trust. I did not marry her. She did not leave me; she did not even openly upbraid me; but nevertheless it hung like a dark cloud over her life. By degrees, she became altered. She tried to drown her memory by frivolity, by all manner of gaiety and excitement, and our life in Paris afforded her many opportunities.

"'The old Count of Cruta made two efforts to rescue his daughter from me. The first time he came alone; and before his righteous fury I was for a moment abashed. "Give me back my daughter!" he thundered, with his back to my closed door, and a pistol pointed to my head. I rang the bell, and Irene came, dressed for the evening, and humming a light opera tune. Then I saw to what depths of callousness I had dragged her, and I shuddered. She listened to the old man's stormy eloquence, and when he had finished his passionate appeal, she shrugged her shoulders slightly. She was perfectly happy, she declared, and she would die

sooner than go back to that *triste* Cruta. Had he had a pleasant journey? she asked, and would he stay and dine? I saw her father shudder, and the words seemed frozen upon his lips. He looked at her in perfect silence for a full minute—looked at her from head to foot, at her soft white dress, with its floating sea of dainty draperies, and at the diamonds on her neck and bosom. Then his eye seemed to blaze with anger.

" ' "Girl!" he cried sternly, "you have dragged down into the mire one of the proudest names in Europe! Curse you for it! As for you, sir," he added, turning to me, "you are a dishonoured scoundrel! a cur!"

" 'He was right! I was a blackguard. But had it not been for those last words of his, I should straightway have offered to have married Irene on the morrow. The words were on my lips, but the contempt of that monosyllable maddened me. The better impulse passed away.

" ' "You should have given her to me when I asked for her hand," I answered. "You cur!" he repeated. I looked at him steadily. "You are an old man," I said, "or I should throw you down my stairs. Now go! Irene has nothing to say to you, nor have I."

" 'He lingered on the threshold for a moment, surveying us both with a calm dignity, before which I felt ashamed.

"'"As you remind me, I am an old man," he said quietly, "and I have, alas, no son to chastise you as you deserve. But the season of old age is the season of prophecy! Listen, Martin de Vaux," pointing towards me, "you shall taste the bitterest dregs of sorrow and remorse in the days to come, for this your evil deed. You may scoff, both of you,—you may say to yourselves that an old man's words are words of folly,—but the day will come! It is writ in the book of fate, and my eyes have seen it! Pile sin upon sin, and pleasure upon pleasure; say to yourselves, 'let us eat and be merry, for to-morrow we shall die!' For so it is written, and my eyes have seen it!"

"'He was gone almost before the echo of his words had died away. I called after him, but there was no answer but the sound of a shutting door. I looked at Irene; she was calmly buttoning her glove.

"'"The carriage is waiting," she reminded me coolly.

"'I gave her my arm, and laughed. We drove to the opera.'"

## CHAPTER XXV

"A BECKONING VOICE FROM OUT A SHADOWY LAND"

MIDNIGHT rang solemnly out from the Abbey clock. The priest paused in his story to count the strokes, and Paul drew out his watch with an incredulous gesture.

"You must stay here to-night," he said; "it will be too late for you to leave."

He rang the bell, and ordered a room to be prepared. Father Adrian, who had been lost in a fit of deep abstraction, looked up and shook his head as the servant quitted the room. "I shall not stay here," he said quietly. "It is impossible."

Paul pointed to the clock. "You have more to tell me," he said, "and it is already late. If you are staying at the monastery of St. Bernard, it is nearly eight miles away, and you cannot possibly return."

"I have not so far to go," Father Adrian answered, "and this is the hour I always choose for walking. Do you wish to hear the rest of your father's confession?"

Paul stood on the hearthrug with bowed head and folded arms. "I am ready!" he said; "go on!"

Father Adrian remained silent for nearly a quarter of an hour; then he recommenced his story.

"'From the time of the old Count's visit,' your father went on, 'I noticed a gradual change in Irene. She grew thin and pale and nervous, disliking more and more, every day, to go out, and becoming suddenly averse to all our previous pursuits and pleasures. We mixed amongst a Bohemian set in Paris, and we had a good many acquaintances of a certain sort. Amongst them was a man whom I always disliked, yet who managed somehow to establish himself upon terms of intimacy with us. His name was Count Victor Ferdinand Hirsfeld, and his nationality was rather a puzzle to me, for he chose to maintain, without any apparent reason, a sort of mystery about it. With Irene he was ever more intimate than with me, and more than once I noticed references in their conversation which seemed to point to some previous acquaintance between them. I asked Irene no questions, for I trusted her but I watched Count Hirsfeld closely. I felt convinced that, under the mask of friendship, he was trying to win Irene from me, and though I never for one moment believed that he would succeed, I was anxious to obtain some proof of his intentions, that I might punish him.

Often after his visits, which seemed to be carefully chosen for a time at which I was nearly certain to be out, I found Irene in tears; but when I sought to make her explain, she had always some excuse.

"'We had lived together for three years when, without any warning, Irene left me. I came home one night from a dinner at the English Embassy, and found her gone. There was no message, not a single line of adieu, not a ghost of a clew by which I could trace her. It was a shock to me; but when the first wrench was over, I knew that it was something of a relief. In my heart I was tired of the irregular life we had been leading, and longing to return to England and my old home. Irene herself was no longer dear to me. While she had remained faithful to me, I had considered myself, in a certain sense, bound to her, although the bonds had commenced to gall. Now that she had left me of her own accord, I was free. I troubled little as to what had become of her; youth is always selfish. She had either gone home to her father, or had run away with Count Hirsfeld, I determined at once. Of the two, I was inclined to believe the latter, from the fact of her having left no message for me, and also as I found that he too had quitted Paris suddenly. I purposely did not attempt to find out, for had I discovered the latter to be true, I should have felt

bound to call Count Hirsfeld out the next time I met him, and I hated duelling. So, with a light heart, I disposed of my Paris establishment, selling even the house, and everything likely to remind me of a page of my history which I desired to blot out.

"'I returned to England, and settled down at Vaux Abbey. In a few months my life with Irene lay back in the past, like a troubled dream, and I did my best to forget it. It was all hateful and tiresome to me. My mind was full now of healthier and more wholesome thoughts and purposes. I felt like a man commencing life anew. Even my conscience had almost ceased to trouble me. Irene had left me of her own will, nor had she been driven to it by any unkindness on my part. I would forget her. I had the right to forget her.

"'About six months had passed, and I was in the full enjoyment of my altered life. One night, when the Abbey was full of guests, a servant whispered in my ear, as we sat at dinner, that a gentleman,—a foreigner, the man believed—had just been driven over from the nearest railway station, and was in the library waiting to see me. I knew in a moment that some sort of a resurrection of that buried past was at hand; and though I nodded carelessly and kept my countenance, my heart sank like lead. As soon as I could

make an excuse, I left the table, with a brief apology to my guests, and made my way to the library.

"'I had expected to find there Irene's father. Judge of my surprise when I found Count Hirsfeld advancing to meet me, pale and travel-stained, from the shadows of the room. I stopped short, and stood with my hands behind me.

"'"Mr. de Vaux, I bring you a letter," he said simply; "I am here as a messenger, and as a messenger only. Nothing but the prayers of a dying woman would have induced me to stand beneath your roof!"

"'"Your presence certainly needs some explanation," I answered coldly. "Give me the letter!"

"'He handed it over, and I took it to the lamplight. The handwriting seemed unfamiliar to me; but when I glanced at the last page, I saw that it was signed "Irene." I read it through hastily.

"CRUTA.

"MARTIN:—

"I left you meaning never to speak or write your name again, but fate has been too strong for me. When you see my handwriting, you may fear that I want to burden you once more with my presence, which has grown so wearisome to you! You need not! Soon there will be nothing left of me but a memory; even that I know will not survive long. For I am dying.

Life is only a matter of days and hours with me now. For me, only a few more suns will rise and set. I am dying, else I had not taken up my pen to write to you.

"Martin, one's last hours are a time for plain speaking. I have never suffered one word of reproach to pass my lips, but you have wronged me deeply! You have turned what should have been the sweetness of my life into bitterness and gall. I do not remind you of this to heap idle reproaches on your head; I remind you of it simply because on my deathbed I am going to ask you what in the past I scorned to do. I am going to ask you to marry me.

"I could not hope to make you understand all that I have suffered during these last few months of my illness. I would not if I could. It is not worth while! My father, although he knows that I am dying, will scarcely speak to me. He has forgotten that I am his daughter, save when he laments it. He sits alone day by day, brooding upon the dishonour of his race. The priest, who prays for me, speaks words of doubtful comfort, as though, after all, he doubted whether salvation were possible for me. The horror of it all has entered into my soul! The sin of the past is ever before my eyes,—black and threatening,—and a great desolation reigns in my heart.

"And from it all I turn to you, Martin, to save me!

You can do it! You only! You lose nothing! You risk nothing! and you will throw some faint light of consolation upon this, my dreary passage through the shadow-land of death. Once you loved me, far off and dim though that time may seem to you. You would be faithful always, you swore, as side by side we stood on board your yacht on the night of our flight, and watched the shores of Cruta grow dimmer and dimmer, and the white-faced dawn break quivering upon the waters. You would be faithful always! The words come back to me as I lie here in this great, dreary bed-chamber, with a cold-faced priest muttering comfortless prayers by my side; dying alone, without a single kindly face to lighten my passage to the grave. Yet, do not read this as a reproach! Read it only as the prelude to this my last appeal to you! Marry me, Martin! It would cost you so little: just a hurried journey here, a few sentences over my bedside, a week's waiting at the most, and you could see me in my grave, and feel yourself free again. Is it too great a thing to do, to make light the heart of a dying woman? I pray God that you may not think so! You have generosity! I appeal to it! Come, I beseech you! It is the prayer of a dying woman! I summon you to Cruta!

"IRENE."

"'Back again in the meshes of my old sin. The letter fluttered down from between my fingers on to the floor, and I stood with folded arms and bowed head, arraigned at the bar of my own judgment. I had marred a girl's fair young life! The memory of those old days—my passionate persuasions and prayers—swept in upon me. Yes! she had trusted me, and I had deceived her! Her sin and her death lay at my door! The hideous rascality of the thing oppressed me. I had been false to my name and traditions.

"'A cold, low voice from the other end of the room broke in upon my surging thoughts. It was Count Hirsfeld who spoke.

"'"Forgive me for disturbing your doubtless pleasant reflections, but time flies, and time is very precious to me just now. I await your answer."

"'"It is not necessary," I replied; "I shall be at Cruta before you!"

## CHAPTER XXVI

"LATE THOU COMEST, CRUEL THOU HAST BEEN"

"'I SPED through England and across the Continent southwards as fast as express train and steamer could carry me. Count Hirsfeld shared the special which carried me from our nearest country station to the Great Northern junction, from whence the Scotch mail bore us to London. Here we parted company, travelling the remainder of the way separately. On the evening of the second day, the steamer which I had hired at Palermo dropped anchor in the bay of Cruta, under the shadow of the grim, black castle; and a small rowing-boat landed me beneath the cliffs before night fell.

"'I made my way up the narrow, winding path alone, and passing across the paved courtyard, rang the hoarse, brazen bell at the principal entrance. A servant, bearing a torch, had opened the door, and was beckoning me to follow him long before its echoes had died away.

"'"Mademoiselle Irene!" I asked him, in a hushed, anxious tone. "She lives?"

"'"She lives!" he repeated sombrely.

"'I followed him along the wide stone corridors, and up countless steps. At last he paused before a door, and after listening for a moment, knocked softly at it.

"'It was opened by a monk, whose face was hidden by the folds of his deep cowl. He motioned me to enter, and immediately closed the door.

"'I found myself in a spacious, lofty bedchamber, bare and dimly lit. Facing me two pale, solemn-visaged monks stood on either side of a drawn curtain, as though guarding the plain iron bed which lay beyond, and towards which I had taken one impulsive step forward. Their presence, and an indefinable gloom,—beyond even the gloom of a chamber of death,—which in the dim twilight seemed to hang about the very air of the place, chilled me. There was little furniture, and no pictures hung upon the walls, save a wooden cross near the foot of the bed, before which two candles were burning. I looked around for some one to whom I could address myself, but there was no one beyond these dark-coated, silent monks, who seemed more like shadows from another world.

"'While I stood in the middle of the room, hesitating, the priest who had admitted me passed by and took up his station at the foot of the bed. He motioned me to stand a little nearer, and suddenly the drear silence of the room was broken by the low, monotonous chant of prayers. I bowed my head, and

kneeling by the bedside I took up the responses, and once for a moment clasped the white, cold hand which lay upon the coverlet, and which was all that I could see of the woman whom I was making my wife.

"'The ceremony seems to me now like some far-distant dream, of which I retain only the vaguest recollection. When it was all over, I laid my hand upon the curtain to draw it back, but the monk nearest to me held my hand in a vise-like grip, and before I could move, a voice from the other end of the room, where the shadows were deepest, arrested me.

"'"Touch that curtain, or dare to look upon my daughter's face, Martin de Vaux, and you die! For her soul's sake I have permitted this! Now go!"

"'I peered through the darkness, and I saw the tall, gaunt frame of the Count of Cruta standing near the entrance. I hesitated for a moment.

"'"Irene is my wife," I answered. "I offer no excuse to you for my conduct, but at least I have the right to try and win her forgiveness."

"'He moved a step forward, and his voice shook with passion. "You have no rights! You are dishonoured! You are a villain! What! you to reason with me under my own roof! Away! Out of my sight, lest I forget my word and deal you out your deserts!"

"My heart was hot with shame and anger, but I lingered. "Let her speak," I answered, pointing to

the bed. "It is she against whom I have sinned, and her word I will obey. Irene! may I not stay by your side? Tell me that you forgive!"

"'I clutched passionately at the curtain, resolved to tear it aside, and plead with Irene upon my knees. But I was held from behind in a strong, vise-like grasp, and one of the monks who stood there on guard sternly wrested the curtain from my hands.

"'"Away with him!" cried the Count, his voice shaking with passion. "Rudolph, do you hear!"

"'I nerved myself for a struggle, but in that moment's pause a thin, white hand stole from behind the curtain and held mine for a moment.

"'"Martin, go quickly!" said a faint, weak voice, so altered that I scarcely recognised it as the voice of Irene. "It is my wish—my command."

"'"One word, Irene!" I cried, struggling to free myself. "Just one word!"

"'"Farewell!"

"'"Irene, you are my wife. Have you nothing else to say to me?"

"'"Farewell!"

"'There was no sweetness, no regret in that single word. I bowed my head in despair and went.'"

* * * * * *

There was a long pause. Father Adrian was leaning back in his chair with half-closed eyes, as though

exhausted. Paul, standing opposite to him, motionless and silent as a figure of stone, was listening to every word with grave, anxious face.

"Will you hear the rest of the story now?" the priest asked after a prolonged silence.

Paul bowed his head. "I am waiting," he said simply.

"I will continue, then, in your father's own words as near as possible. This is what he told me."

"'I lingered in the island for several days, staying at the monastery, unwilling to go away, and yet frustrated in every attempt I made to enter the castle. On the fourth day, at sunrise, I was awakened suddenly by the deep tolling of the castle bell. I dressed hastily, and hurried up there; but I was thrust from the door, and forbidden to enter. I learned the truth, however, from one of the servants. Irene was dead. On the next day I saw the little funeral procession start from the castle, and directly they entered the grounds of the monastery I joined them. The old Count, bowed and aged with grief, stayed the ceremony, and bade them, with a sudden flash of his old anger, thrust me from the place. But the priest by whose side I had taken my stand raised his hand, and forbade them to touch me. I was in sanctuary,—my feet were on holy ground—and though the Count of

Cruta, and Count Hirsfeld who knelt by his side, trembled with anger at my presence, I remained, and on my knees by my wife's grave I uttered the first prayer my lips had framed since childhood. Through the pine trees which fringed the cliffs, I could see the path where she and I had met in the days when I was her father's guest, and when I had knelt at her feet a passionate lover. The sunlight flashed upon the blue waters below, and the seabirds flew screaming around our heads. It was all just as it had been in the old days; the same for me, but never more for her. The long black coffin was lowered into the grave, and reverently Count Hirsfeld stepped forward and covered it with armfuls of exquisite white flowers, whose perfume made faint the odorous air. And I had no flowers to throw, nothing but the tribute of a passionate grief, and a heart well-nigh broken with sorrow and remorse.

"'The ceremony was over, and the black-robed monks and priest had passed away in a long, solemn procession. Her father, Count Hirsfeld, and I remained there alone; and over Irene's grave I leaned forward, speaking gently and humbly to him, praying for one word of forgiveness. His only answer was a look of scorn, and he turned away from me with loathing. He would not hear me speak. To him, I was his daughter's murderer.

"'I left the island that night, and returned to England. For several years I lived a very retired life, attending to my duties upon the estate and seldom travelling beyond it. The memory of Irene seemed to haunt me. But as time went on, a change came over my spirits. I was young; and although I still bitterly regretted the past, its influence became weaker and weaker. What was done could not be undone; such reparation as was possible I had made. Brooding over my sin would never make it the less. I reasoned thus with myself, and the final result was inevitable. I commenced to mix more with my fellows, to look up my old friends in town,—in fact, to take up again the threads of my life, which I had once regarded as broken for ever.

"'After a while I married; and then, more than ever, Irene and that portion of my past which was bound up with her seemed like some vague, far-distant nightmare, fast assuming a very remote place in my thoughts. I loved my wife as I had never loved Irene, and for a time I was intensely happy. A son was born to me, and in my joy I feasted half the county at Vaux Abbey. I had desired nothing so much as this, for the De Vaux estates and mines, immense as they are, are all strictly entailed. A son was wanted to complete my happiness, and a son I had.

But already, although I knew it not, a storm was gathering for me.

"'It was about a fortnight after the festivities, and I had just come in with some friends from an afternoon's shooting, when I was told that a gentleman from abroad—the servant believed—was waiting to see me in the library. Even as he spoke the words I seemed to know who it was. My heart sank, and the presentiment of some coming evil was strong upon me. I hesitated, and then, feverishly anxious to know the worst, I turned away with some careless excuse to my guests and entered the library.

"'It was Count Hirsfeld who stood there waiting for my arrival, with a calm, evil smile upon his lips, which instinctively I felt to be the herald of some coming trouble for me. Yet my courage did not altogether desert me.

"'"Count Hirsfeld, your presence here demands an immediate explanation," I said sternly. "Had I been at home, you would not have been admitted."

"'"I come," he answered slowly, with his eyes fixed steadily upon my face, "as an ambassador from your wife."

"'"From my wife!" I repeated. "You do not know her! What do you mean?"

"'He shrugged his shoulders. "I regret that my

meaning is not clear," he said. "I repeat that I come as an ambassador from your wife, Irene de Vaux. I have brought you a message from her."

"'A message from the dead!" I gasped.

"'"Dead! By no means!" he answered, with a slow, cruel smile. "Irene is living! Is it possible that you did not know it?"'"

## CHAPTER XXVII

"GRIM FIGURES TRACED BY SORROW'S FIERY HAND"

THE lamp which stood on Paul's writing-table had gone out, and only a few dull red embers remained in the grate. By moving a single yard backwards, Paul was almost lost in the deep shadows which hung about the room, whilst such light as there was fell directly upon the priest's pale face. During those last few moments his voice had grown a shade more solemn—more intense. Paul, who stood looking out at him from the darkness with dazed senses, like a man in a dream, never doubted for an instant, although perhaps he scarcely realized the full meaning of the story to which he was listening.

"It must have been in this very room," Father Adrian continued, looking around him, "that your father and Count Hirsfeld stood face to face. But you are naturally impatient. I will take up the story again in your father's own words to me.

* * * * *

"'It was several moments before I could collect myself sufficiently to answer Count Hirsfeld. Every-

thing seemed dim and unreal around me. Only that calm, mocking face remained steadfast, and his words rang in my ears.

"'"It is a lie!" I gasped. "We stood together by her grave! She is dead!"

"'The calmness suddenly vanished from my tormentor's face and manner. His eyes were ablaze with mingled triumph and hate. "You thought so, you poor fool!" he hissed out at me across the table. "Bah! you were a fool! You were easily deceived! Listen!

"'"You thought it a light thing to carry off the only daughter of the last Count of Cruta. 'Twas easily done, no doubt; but you made for yourself enemies of men from whose vengeance you were bound to suffer. One was the Count whose daughter you had dishonoured, and whose proud name you disgraced; the other was myself, the man whom she was to have married—myself, who loved her! Do you think that because I did not seek you out and shoot you as you deserved, that I forgot? There were men on the island who loved their lord, and who at the word from him would have hunted you down and murdered you. If he restrained them, do you imagine he was willing to bear this great dishonour without striking a blow? Bah! it was my word that said 'wait,' my counsel which saved you from death as too light a punishment. There is another way, I said. So we waited.

"'"It was my persuasions which induced Irene to leave you and return to her father. It was I who pointed out to her your great selfishness, and raised in her the longing for revenge! It was I who laid the plot into which you fell.

"'"A few words more! It is all so simple! Irene was about to become a mother; and you, believing her to be on her deathbed, married her. The child was born on the next day—your son and heir! Meanwhile, Irene's waiting maid, who had been for long in a consumption, died. It was her funeral which you attended with such interesting penitence. Irene herself was fast recovering; she was never in any real danger. She lives with her old father, and the boy lives with her. We waited! We read of your marriage, and the Count cried, 'Let us strike!' But I said, 'No, let us wait!' Time went on. We read again of the birth of a son and heir to you, and of the great rejoicings. Irene held your boy in her arms, and she frowned. 'Go now,' she commanded, 'tell Martin de Vaux that his son and heir is here, and his wife is here! Tell him that they are weary of his absence.' So I came!"

"'There was a dead silence. My throat and lips were dry; I could not speak. Count Hirsfeld watched me with folded arms. It was his vengeance!

"'"It is not true!" I stammered out at last. "I will not believe it. Irene is dead!"

"'I tried to speak confidently, but I failed. In my heart I believed the Count.

"'He shrugged his shoulders. "You have reason," he remarked. "Why should you believe me? Come to Cruta, and you will see for yourself. You can see the headstone at the foot of the grave: 'Sacred to the memory of Marie, faithful servant of Irene of Cruta.' You can see the doctor who attended her and your wife at the same time! Better still, you can see your wife and your infant son! What do you say?"

"'"I will not go!" I cried passionately. "I will not see them! It was base treachery!"

"'"One must use the weapons of craft against villains," he said. "There is no baseness to equal yours. You are repaid in your own coin; that is all."

"'I sank into a chair. The insult moved me to no fit of anger. I was numbed.

"'"If this be true," I asked, "what does Irene ask for? I will not go back to her, or see her, or acknowledge her in any way. She can have money, that is all!"

"'"Naturally, she requires an allowance," Count Hirsfeld answered, "and a large one, to enable her to bring up her son in accordance with his position!"

"'"She shall have the allowance; she shall have what she asks for," I declared; "but I will never

acknowledge the boy, or her. If he takes the name of De Vaux, or forces himself upon me in any way, it shall be open war. The English courts will annul that marriage."

"'"I think not," he answered coolly. "Besides, you married into a noble family, did you not—a duke's daughter? How pleasant her position would be while such a case was being tried! And your son——"

"'I stopped him angrily. "I repeat that I will not acknowledge them. Money they can have, and the boy's future shall be my care! But not if he ever dares to call himself De Vaux."

"'The Count shrugged his shoulders. "I am but an ambassador," he said. "I will convey what you have said to your wife. You shall hear her decision."

"'He went away, and for a fortnight I was left in misery. At the end of that time I had a letter signed "Irene." It was cold and short. It told me that, so far as she herself was concerned, she had no desire or intention of claiming her position as my wife. All she demanded was an allowance to be paid to her order at a certain bank in Palermo at regular intervals for the support of herself and for the proper education and bringing up of her son. As to his future, she could not pledge herself to anything; for when the time came, he should decide for himself. She would bring

him up in ignorance; but on his twenty-fifth birthday she should tell him the whole story, and place all the necessary papers in his hands. If he chose to use them and claim the De Vaux estates, he would easily be able to do so. If, on the other hand, he decided to remain as he was, she should not attempt in any way to alter his decision!

"'The letter was a great relief to me. Five-and-twenty years was a long respite. The boy might die —a thousand things might happen before then. At any rate, I was enough of a philosopher to seal down that secret page in my history, and to live as though it had never existed.

"'Five-and-twenty years is a long time, but it passed away. It is the portion of my life which I look back upon with the most pleasure. I did my utmost to atone for a wasted youth, and in some measure I succeeded. My fears had grown fainter and fainter, and when the blow came it was like a thunderbolt falling from a clear sky. One morning I received a letter in Irene's writing, a little fainter and less firm than of old, but still familiar to me. It contained only a few lines. She had told her son all, and he elected to assert his rightful name and position. In future he intended to call himself "De Vaux." and on my death he would claim the estates.

"'I read the letter, and determined on instant action. In a week my son Paul and I were on board my yacht, starting for the Mediterranean. We made for Palermo, and here we separated,—Paul, at all hazard, to find Count Hirsfeld, to whom I made a splendid offer if he would aid me in inducing Irene to change her purpose; I for Cruta, to see Irene.'

* * * * *

"This is almost the end of your father's confession to me," Father Adrian continued. "At Cruta he sought the hospitality of the monastery, where he was taken ill. He wrote an urgent letter to you, and immediately he was able to walk he went up to the castle. I have already told you of the manner of return. Of that visit he told me scarcely anything, and he told me nothing at all concerning the wound which he received there. Only I gathered that he was more than ever anxious to see Count Hirsfeld. It was while waiting for your return that he made this confession to me. I have finished."

* * * * *

The white morning light was stealing into the room through the uncurtained windows. The fire had burnt out, and there was only a handful of ashes in the grate. Outside in the park a grey mist was hanging about in the hollows and over the tree-tops, and something of

its damp chilliness seemed to have found its way into the apartment. Paul, who had been leaning heavily upon the mantelpiece, with his head buried in his hands, looked up and shivered. Then he glanced quickly across towards the opposite easy-chair. Father Adrian was still there, and at Paul's movement he rose to his feet.

"This has been a terrible night for you, I fear," he said quietly. "I am sorry to have given you so much pain. If I could I would have spared you."

"I thank you," Paul answered wearily. "It was right that I should know. Why did you not tell me at Cruta?"

"It seemed to me that your father's death was enough for you to bear! Perhaps I was wrong!"

Paul made no answer. His thoughts seemed suddenly to have travelled far away. Father Adrian watched his pale, stricken face with cold, pitiless eyes.

"You are weary," he said softly. "I shall leave you now, but I have something more to say to you on this matter. It is no part of your father's confession. It is from myself. Can I come to-morrow or the next day?"

"Come in a week," Paul answered. "I shall be able to talk calmly then about this."

Father Adrian hesitated. "A week! Well, let it be so, then. Farewell!"

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### "ADREA'S DIARY"

"Spring blossoms on the land, and anguish in the heart"

To-night I shall close my diary for a long while, very likely for ever. I am heartily thankful for it. These last few days have been so wretched, full of so much miserable uncertainty, that their record has grown to be a wearisome task. It has ceased to give me any relief; it has become nothing but a burden. How could it be otherwise, when the days themselves have been so grey, so full of shadows and disappointments? You have been a relief to me sometimes, my silent friend; but what lies before me is not to be recorded in your pages.

Twenty-four hours have passed since I made my last entry. It was night then, and it is night now. All that lies between seems phantasmagoric and unreal. I ask myself whether it has really happened; and when the day's events rise slowly up before my memory, I almost fail to recognise them. Yet I have but to close my eyes and lean back, and it all crowds in upon me. In the future I know that this day will stand out clear and distinct from all the rest of my life.

It was early in the morning when I started for Vaux Abbey across the moorland road. So long have I seen this bleak county wrapped in mists and sea fogs that to-day I scarcely recognised it. There was a clear blue sky, streaked with little patches of white, wind-swept clouds, and the sun—actually the sun—was shining brilliantly. How it changed everything! The grey, hungry sea, which I had never been able to look upon without a shudder, seemed to have caught the colouring of the sky, and a million little scintillations of glistening light rose and fell at every moment on the bosom of the tiny, white-crested waves. And the moorland, too, was transformed. Its bare, rock-strewn undulations lost all their harshness of outline and colouring in the sweet, glancing sunlight; and afar off the line of rugged hills, which I had never seen save with their heads wreathed in a cloud of white mist, stood out clear and distinct against the distant horizon, tinged with a dim, purple light.

Why did it all make such an impression upon me, I wonder? I cannot say; but nothing in all my life ever struck so deep a note of sadness. I feel it now; I shall feel it always. There was madness in my blood when I started, I think; but before my walk was half over, it had increased a thousand-fold. Every little sound and sight seemed to aggravate it. I missed the

dull sighing and moaning of the wind in the black copses—a sound which had somehow endeared itself to me during these last few days—and in its place the soft murmur of what seemed almost a summer breeze amongst the tall pine-tops stirred in me an unreasonable anger. The face of the whole country seemed smiling at me. What mockery! What right had the earth to rejoice when grief and anxiety were driving me mad? For it was indeed a sort of madness which laid hold of me. I clenched my hands, and muttered to myself as I walked swiftly along. The road was deserted, and I met no one. Once a dark bush away off seemed to me to take a man's shape. I stopped short. Could it be Father Adrian returning to the Abbey? I felt my breath come quickly as I stood there waiting. The idea excited me. I found myself trembling with a passion that was not of fear, and, suddenly stooping down, I picked up a sharp flint, and grasped it tightly between my fingers. Then I moved stealthily on, and the thing defined itself. After all, it was only a bush, not a man at all. I tossed my weapon on one side with a strained little laugh. The sense of excitement passed away, but it left an odd flavour behind it. I found myself deliberating as to what I had meant to do with that stone if it had really been Father Adrian, and if I had succeeded in stealing silently up

behind him. Perhaps I scarcely realized my full intention, but a dim sense of it remained with me. It was the development of a new instinct born of this swiftly-built-up hatred. I have my reasons for writing of this. I wish to distinctly mark the period of the event which I have just recorded.

There was no fear of my mistaking the way to Vaux Abbey, for it stood upon a hill, and had been within sight ever since I had taken the moorland road. I was unused to walking, and the road was rough; but I do not remember once feeling in any way fatigued or foot-sore, although one of my shoes had a great hole in it, and was almost in strips. My mind was too full of the end of my journey to be conscious of such things. I had only one fear: that I should be too late; that somehow the threatened blow would have been struck, and Paul in some way removed from me. It was fear more than hope which buoyed me up. But anyhow, it answered its purpose, for in less than three hours after I had started I found myself before the great hall-door of Vaux Abbey.

A deep, hollow peal followed my nerveless little pull at the chain bell-rope, and almost immediately the door opened. A grey-haired manservant, in black livery, looked down at me in surprise.

"I wish to see Mr. Paul de Vaux!" I announced. "Is he in?"

The man hesitated. "I believe so, miss," he said doubtfully; "but he is engaged on some important business, and has given orders that no one is to disturb him. Lady de Vaux is at home."

"My business is with Mr. Paul de Vaux," I said. "Will you tell him that it is some one from the Hermitage, and I think that he will see me."

The man did not answer me in words, but motioned me to follow him. My courage was failing me a little, and I was certainly inclined not to look around, but nevertheless the place made an impression on me. The great hall which we were crossing was like the interior of some richly decorated church. The ceiling was dome-shaped, and the base of the cupola was surrounded by stained glass windows, which cast a dim light down upon the interior. The white stone flags were here and there covered by Eastern rugs, thrown carelessly down, but for the most part were bare, and as slippery as marble; so slippery that once I nearly fell, and only saved myself by catching at an oak bench. Just as I recovered myself, I saw the figure of a woman descending the huge double oak staircase which terminated opposite to us. My guide paused when he saw her, and I was also compelled to.

"Here is her ladyship!" he said.

I watched her slowly advance toward us, a fine,

stately old lady, carrying herself with unmistakable dignity, although she was forced to lean a good deal on a gold-mounted, black ebony stick. And, as I looked at her, I thought of Father Adrian's words: "I can break his mother's heart;" and I leant eagerly forward in the chastened twilight with my eyes anxiously fixed upon her. She came slowly on towards me, and when she was a few yards away she spoke to the servant.

"Does this young lady wish to see me, Richards?"

She spoke to the man, but she looked towards me, and evidently expected me to address her. For a moment I could not. A little gasp of relief had quivered upon my lips, and my eyes were suddenly dim. To look into Lady de Vaux's face, stately, calm, and kind, seemed like a strong antidote to my fears of Father Adrian. It was quite evident that nothing unexpected had happened during the last twenty-four hours. Father Adrian's threat had been an empty one. In the presence of Lady de Vaux, the fears which had been consuming me departed. She was so unmoved, so indifferent. How could a little Jesuit priest hurt such a one as she?

The thoughts chased one another quickly through my mind; but still my hesitation was apparent. After waiting in vain for me to speak, the servant who was conducting me answered Lady de Vaux's question.

"The young lady asked for Mr. Paul, your lady-

ship. It was doubtful whether I might disturb him."

"For Mr. Paul?" Lady de Vaux looked at me, leaning forward on her stick, and with her eyebrows a little uplifted. "My son is particularly engaged, and has left word that he does not wish to be disturbed for several hours," she said. "If you have anything to say to him, you can say it to me. I am Lady de Vaux!"

"Thank you! I must wait and see your son," I answered.

She moved away with a slight and distinctly haughty inclination of her head. "You can show this young lady into the waiting-room, Richards," she directed. "Take her name in to Mr. Paul when he rings. By the bye," she added, pausing in her slow progress over the hall, and looking me once more steadily in the face, "what is your name?"

"You would not know it," I answered. "I have come from the Hermitage—near here."

She did not speak to me for a moment, but I saw the colour rising into her cheeks, and her fingers were trembling. It was foolish of me to have told her. A glance into her face showed me that she had heard something, she knew something of me. She was looking at me as at some object almost beneath her contempt. Yet she spoke quite calmly.

"You are Adrea Kiros, the dancing girl!"

I answered her quite coolly—I believe respectfully. She was Paul's mother. Yet I could see that she was going to be very rude to me.

"You can have nothing to say to my son," she declared. "It is infamous that you should have followed him here—to his own house. Be so good as to quit it at once. Mr. de Vaux shall be informed later of the honour of your visit, and if he has anything to say to you, he can find other means save an interview under this roof. Richards!"

She pointed across the hall towards the entrance. I stood quite still, struggling with my passion. If she had been any other woman, I should have struck her across the lips.

"I shall remain!" I answered. "I am here to see Mr. de Vaux; I shall see him! Don't dare to touch me, man!" I added fiercely, as Richards laid his hand upon my shoulder.

He shrank back hastily. I even believe that he muttered an apology. Perhaps they saw that I was not to be trifled with, for Lady de Vaux suddenly changed her tactics.

"Follow me!" she said, sweeping round, with an imperious gesture. "You shall see my son! You shall hear from his own lips what he thinks of this —intrusion. Perhaps you will leave the Abbey at his bidding, if not at mine."

I followed her in silence, carrying myself proudly, but with fast-beating heart. What would he think of my coming? Would he call it an intrusion? At any rate he could not be pleased; for even if he received me kindly, he would have his mother's anger to face. Yet, how could I have kept away?

We halted, all three of us, before a closed door at the back of the hall. There was no answer to the man's somewhat ostentatious knock, and Lady de Vaux, after a moment's waiting, turned the handle of the door and swept into the room. I kept close behind her.

I can remember it now; I shall always remember it—the dim, peculiar light which tired our eyes the moment we had stepped inside. It was easy to discover the reason. The heavy velvet curtains were still drawn in front of the high windows, and on a distant table a lamp was only just flickering out. At first it seemed as though the great chamber was empty. There was no one to be seen, and it was not until we reached a deep recess at the further end that we discovered Paul.

At the sight of him we both stood still—Lady de Vaux moved in spite of her stately composure, and I spellbound. He was sitting before an oak writing desk covered with papers, and in the midst of them

his head was resting upon his bowed arms. He neither spoke nor moved, nor seemed indeed in any way conscious of our approach. The window fronting him was, unlike all the others, uncurtained and wide open, and a flood of sunshine was streaming in upon his bowed head, and mingling with the sicklier light of the rest of the apartment. It was a strange and ghastly combination; not only in itself, but in the sort of halo it seemed to cast around his dark, bowed head. Ah! Paul, my love, my love! how my heart ached for you!

"He is asleep," Lady de Vaux said fearfully. "Paul!"

I held out my hand to check her. "Let him alone!" I whispered hoarsely. "I will go away. Don't you see that he is resting."

She took no notice of me, nor of my backward movement, but leaned over towards him as though to touch his arm. A sort of fury came upon me. I knew that the Paul whom she was trying to recall from the land of unconsciousness would never again be the Paul of the past. Father Adrian had kept his word. The blow which he had threatened had fallen. Paul! I looked at your dear bowed head until the tears dimmed my eyes, and the great room swam around me. For in my heart I felt that it was I who had

brought this thing upon you; I who could have saved you by a single word.

"Paul, wake up! It is I, your mother."

I snatched hold of her hand, and drew it away. "Let him rest," I cried, fiercely. "He will waken soon enough."

She looked at me in dignified astonishment. "How dare you presume to dictate to me in this fashion?" she exclaimed. "And why should he not be awakened? It is past mid-day. Paul!"

The crouching figure moved. He had heard, then! I held my breath, longing to escape, yet compelled to watch with fascinated eyes the rising of that bowed head. There was no start, or hurried awakening, if indeed he had been asleep at all. He simply turned his head, and looked at us with surprise, without any emotion of any sort.

I hid my face in my hands, and sobbed. Lady de Vaux was silent with horror. For there was something inexpressibly, awfully moving in the silent, passionless sorrow which seemed written with an unsparing hand onto that white face. All combativeness had passed away, but resignation had not come to take its place. And, apart from the outward evidence of the agony through which he had passed, its physical traces were very apparent. Deep, black lines seemed

furrowed into the flesh under his dull eyes, and the firm,handsome mouth was drawn and quivering. It was such a change as might have been worked by some deadly Eastern poison, eating away the corporal frame. To think that it had worked from within—that burning and terrible sorrow had caused it—was horrible.

Lady de Vaux was the first to speak. The icy composure of her manner was gone. Her voice was strained and anxious.

"Why, Paul, what have you been doing here all night? Do you know that it is past mid-day? Has anything happened? Are you ill?"

"Ill? No; I think not." He seemed to be speaking from a great way off. Nothing about him was natural. He was on his feet, but I expected every moment to see him reel and fall.

"But, Paul, what have you been doing—writing?" Lady de Vaux asked anxiously. Then, as though warned by his strange appearance, she checked his mechanical answer. "Never mind, never mind! You are tired, I can see. Won't you go and lie down for awhile? Come, I will go with you."

She had forgotten me, until she found that he paid no heed to her words; that his eyes travelled past her, and remained fixed upon me. Then she turned swiftly upon me.

"You had better go," she said in a low, imperative whisper. "Ask them to show you into my room, and wait there for me."

I took no notice of her. My eyes were fixed upon Paul. I felt that he was going to speak to me; and he did.

"Adrea! Adrea!" he said slowly. "How is it that you are here? You did not come with him, did you? No! no! of course not. And yet, how is it that you are here?"

"I feared Father Adrian and his threats, and I was alone, quite alone, and—and I could bear it no longer. I was obliged to come."

His face grew a trifle more animated; I could see that he was recovering. The dumb stupor which had held his features rigid was passing away.

"Yes, I am glad you are here. I want to talk to you. I had some important business which kept me writing here all night, and must have fallen asleep. I will go and change my things and come back to you."

He looked down at his crumpled shirt-front and disordered tie, and then moved slowly towards the door. Lady de Vaux hesitated for a moment, with a dark frown upon her face, and then laid her hand upon his arm.

"Your explanation should surely have been ad-

dressed to me, Paul," she said coldly. "Who is this young lady?"

"She is a friend of mine," Paul answered, "and ——"

"I heard you call her 'Adrea,'" Lady de Vaux continued. "May I ask whether it is indeed Miss Adrea Kiros?"

"I have told you that is my name, Lady de Vaux," I answered promptly. "You have possibly heard of me."

Lady de Vaux turned her back upon both of us, and left the room without a word.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### "ADREA'S DIARY"

"Love, blossoming in the roses, holds a dagger in her hands."

WE were alone, Paul and I, in that great, solemn room, full of pale, phantom-like lights and quivering shadows. He was standing a few yards away from me, with his head half averted, and his eyes full of a great, hopeless despair. In silence I approached him, and took his death-cold hand in mine.

"It is no matter," I whispered; "I do not care for your mother! Her words are nothing! I will not leave you—not till you tell me everything."

"Everything!" He echoed the word, and looked at me helplessly. "Everything! Tell you everything!"

Suddenly there was a change. The numbed, helpless look left his face, and his features were relaxed. He was himself again; a strong, brave man, only shaken by the storm.

"Adrea, forgive me! Did you think that I was going mad? I have had a terrible shock, and I have been up all night listening to a story which brings great suffering and misery upon me!"

His eyes had suddenly a far-away look in them, so sad that I felt the tears rush into mine. I pressed his hand to let him know that I understood; but I kept my face turned from him. Ah! love is a strange thing, indeed! If I had not cared, Paul, I could have sympathised with you so nicely, and made so many pretty speeches. But I love you, and it made me feel very strange and solemn. I had nothing to say; my heart was too full. Did you understand, I wonder? Will you ever understand? Paul, my love! my love! It is so sweet to say that over and over to myself in this dark chamber, where there is no one to hear me, or to see me looking so foolish. You make me feel so different, Paul! That is because you yourself are so different from all the men I know; from all the men I have ever seen.

We stood there, quite silent, for some moments. Then he drew a quick, stifled breath, and caught hold of my hands. "I cannot breathe in this place," he said, looking half fearfully around; "the very air seems tainted with that horrible story, and its ghosts are lurking in every corner!"

"Let me draw the curtains," I whispered. The sunlight will banish them. You are dazed."

He held my hand tightly, and drew me towards the window. "Never mind the curtains! We will go out; out over the moor."

He was feverishly impatient to be gone, but I held him back. "Your clothes!" I reminded him. "And you have no hat!"

He looked down doubtfully at his disordered evening dress, and then released my hands. "Wait for me, here," he begged. "Promise that you will not go away; that nothing shall make you go."

I promised.

"See! I shall lock the door," he continued, as he reached the threshold. "No one can come in and disturb you!"

"Please to have some tea and a bath!" I begged. "I do not mind waiting. You will be ill, if you do not mind."

He was gone about half an hour. Once, some one came and tried the door, but I took no notice. At last I heard the key turn in the lock, and he entered. "Did you think that I was long?" he asked, coming up to me with a smile.

I shook my head; my eyes were full of tears, and there was a lump in my throat. I could not speak. He had changed all his clothes, and was carefully dressed in a brown tweed shooting suit and gaiters, but the correctness and order of his external appearance seemed only to emphasize the ravages which one single night's suffering had wrought upon his strong, handsome face.

Hard, cruel lines had furrowed their way across his forehead, and under his eyes were deep black marks. His bronze cheeks were white and sunken, and a bright red spot burned on one of them. But it was a change of which the details could give no idea. His face had caught the inflection of his inward agony, and retained it. It was there, if not for the world to see, at any rate terribly evident to me, to those who loved him.

He was quite calm now, however. It was as though the fires of suffering had burnt themselves out, leaving behind them a silent, charred desolation. He took my arm, and together we left the room, passing through the high French windows and along an open terrace until we reached the gardens. We turned down a broad walk bordered by high yew hedges, at the bottom of which was a little gate leading into the park. The air was fragrant with the perfume of violets, and early stocks and hyacinths, mingled every now and then with a more delicate perfume from the greenhouses on the other side of the red-brick wall. How beautiful it all seemed, in that sweet, dancing sunlight! —the songs of the birds, the blossoming fruit-trees, and pink-budded chestnuts, the scents which floated about on the soft west breeze, and the constant humming of bees and other winged insects. Only in England could there have been so sudden a change

from the grey mists and leaden skies of yesterday. Even in that moment of extreme tension I could not help an exclamation of admiration as we came to an end of the gravelled walk, and Paul held open for me a little iron gate.

"How beautiful your home is!" I cried. "How you must love it!"

A look almost of agony passed across his face. It came and went in a moment. "Yes! I love it!" he answered, "but it is not my home. Henceforth I have no home. I may well be thankful that I have even a name!"

I looked at him, waiting for an explanation, but he walked on in silence. It was not until we were halfway across the park that I spoke. "I do not understand!" I said softly. "Will you not tell me something of your trouble?"

"I would that I could, Adrea!" he answered. His voice was so gentle, and yet his face was so stern. "But no, I cannot. It is a secret. It is only a blotted page of our family history made clear to me. But it alters everything!"

"Does it make you poorer?" I asked falteringly.

He looked down in my eyes bravely; but his voice shook as he answered: "If it be true—as I scarcely doubt—it takes from me everything: my money, my

home, my future. It brings everything but disgrace upon us, Adrea, and even that must touch our name. Even though the living are spared, the memory of the dead must suffer!"

I felt the tears flowing down my cheeks, but I dashed them away. "I do not understand. I——"

"Of course not! and I cannot explain. Yet it is simple! I have an elder brother, of whom I never heard, to whom everything belongs. I am going to find him!"

"Where is he?" I cried. He shook his head. "That I cannot tell. Father Adrian knows, but he will not speak. I am going in search of him myself. I am going to Cruta!"

To Cruta! The name rang in my ears, and earth and trees and sky seemed reeling before me. Then I clutched him by the arm, and cried out hysterically,—

"You shall not go there! The place is horrible! You shall not go!"

He stood still, and looked at me in wonderment. We had crossed the park now, and were on the edge of the bare moorland. His figure alone stood out in solitary relief against the sky. I was half mad with fear and dismay. He did not understand. How could he?

"It is at Cruta that I can learn all that there still is for me to learn," he said. "I shall start for there to-night."

Oh! it was horrible! What could I say? How was I to stop him? How much dare I tell? I caught hold of his hands, and held them tightly.

"Paul, I want to ask you something! When you heard from the convent that relations had claimed me and taken me away, and then, a year afterwards, you found me there—in London—a dancing girl, what did you think?"

He answered me at once and without hesitation. "I thought that you had misled the Lady Superior,—that you were weary of your life there, and had run away."

I shook my head. "I knew that you thought so and I never denied it. But it was not so! I was not unhappy at the convent, but one day I was sent for and bidden prepare for a journey. Some relatives had sent for me, and I was to go. And to where? It was to Cruta! Paul, it was old Count of Cruta who claimed me. I cannot tell you anything of the time I spent there, shut up in the gloomy castle; it was horrible beyond all words. Even the memory of it makes me shudder. If only I could tell you! But I must not! I can tell you this, though. In less than six months I felt myself going mad; and one night I stole down to the beach and unfastened a small boat and rowed away, scarcely caring what happened to me so that I could but escape from that awful place. It was a desperate

chance. I was out all day without food or water, rowing and drifting until Cruta lay like a speck in the distance. Then by chance I was picked up by an English yacht, and they brought me to London. I arrived there helpless and miserable, and, ah! how lonely! I dared not go back to the convent for fear I should be sent back to Cruta. There was only you. I went to your bankers, and they told me that you were abroad —on the Continent. By chance they asked me there my name, and by chance again I told them it truthfully. They told me that they had money for me there. I had only to sign a receipt, and they gave me more than I asked for—ten times more. Then I remembered the address of an English girl who had been at the convent with me, and she gave me a home for a time. It was through her dancing mistress that I became—a dancing girl. I have told you this, Paul, because I want you to promise me not to go Cruta. It is an evil place. They are mad there. Promise me!"

He looked at me gravely and very tenderly; but his tone was firm. "Adrea, it is necessary that I go there," he said. "I cannot rest for a moment until I know for certain whether a story which I have just been told is a true one. The proof lies in Cruta! It is no whim which is taking me there! I must go!"

My heart was sick with dread. Yet what could I

do? I said nothing; only I covered my face with my hands and wept.

"Adrea, you are a foolish child!" he said, bending over me. "What is there for me to fear at Cruta? Look up and tell me!"

I shook my head. "You would not heed me," I answered sadly. "I dare not tell you. But there is one thing," I added hastily. "Will you do it for me simply because I ask you?"

"If it be possible, yes!"

I stood still on a little hillock, and faced him eagerly. "Then do not go to Cruta until to-morrow!" I begged. "It will make no difference to you."

"And what difference will it make to you he asked, perplexed.

"Never mind! promise!" He hesitated for a moment, with a frown on his forehead, and his face turned seaward.

"Well! I will promise then!"

I caught hold of his hand, and held it tightly. "You are very good to me!" I said. "*Allons*! let us move onward!"

We had reached the Hermitage, and I had spoken scarcely a single word of comfort. An icy coldness seemed to have stolen into my heart. I had ceased to think of Paul, or of my love. There was something

else; another passion which made me blind. Yet I let him come in with me, and yielded myself up for a while to the dream of loving and being loved by him. While I lay in his arms, with my head upon his shoulder, and every now and then felt his light, caressing touch upon my face,—why then, the world for me was bounded by that little room, and I had no thoughts which travelled outside it. But it lasted only while he was with me. When he stood up, and said that he must go, I did not seek to keep him.

"Shall I come again?" he asked, as we stood hand in hand before the door.

I shook my head. "Not to-night love! I shall be better alone. I am weary, and I have my things to collect."

I knew he would be surprised. He withdrew his hand, and manlike, was almost angry. "I forgot. You will leave here, I suppose!"

I shrugged my shoulders. "What should keep me, Paul? I could not live here alone. Every stone and tree would be full of barren memories. No! to-morrow I go to London. I have sent all the servants away to-day, except Gomez. You will be with me early!"

"I will be outside your window before you are up!" he promised with a touch of gaiety in his tone. "See that Gomez has breakfast for two!"

He passed down the avenue, and out of sight. I closed the door with a little shudder and turned round. Gomez was by my side. Through the gloom I could see that his dark eyes were full of fire, and his olive features were set and grim.

"What do you want Gomez?" I asked quickly.

He drew close to my side. "The priest," he muttered, "has he—has he dared——"

His breath was coming quickly. He spoke English but slightly, and in the excitement the words seemed to stick in his throat.

I interrupted him. "He has told Mr. de Vaux some strange, horrible story. What do you know of it?"

"All! All! All! I was there—in the chamber! My master's words to him—I heard them all. He has told, then! He has threatened! Oh! if only I had known when he was here!"

The man's fierce face and gesture told their own tale. I beckoned him to follow me into the room where Paul and I had been sitting, and closed the door.

"You were Martin de Vaux's faithful servant," I said. "Do you want to see his son driven from his home and robbed of his lands?"

The man moved his lips, making a curious sound, and drew a long, gurgling breath. He was shaking with excitement.

"Who should do it?"

"The priest!" I answered softly.

"Because of the words, the story of which my master spoke to him at his death in the monastery?"

"Yes! because of that."

"Ah!" He stole up to my side with a noiseless, animal movement, and whispered in my ear. His eyes were burning; his face was full of evil meaning. Yet I did not shrink from him. I welcomed him with a smile. He whispered into my ear. It was like the hiss of a snake; but I smiled. I whispered back again. He nodded. Ah! the way before me was growing clear at last. Was it not fate that had brought Gomez ready to my hand? Ay! fate! A good fate! A kind fate! We stood close together in that dimly lit room; and though we were alone in the house, we spoke in whispers to one another. When I moved to the door, Gomez followed me.

I came down in ten minutes, clad in a long, dark cloak, with a small hat and a thick veil. I took a stick from the rack, and there was something else in my deep pocket.

"Alone!" he whispered, as I moved towards the door.

"Alone!" I answered. "Make a good fire in the drawing-room, and let there be food and wine there."

"For two?" he asked with an evil smile.

"For two!"

## CHAPTER XXX

### "ADREA'S DIARY"

"A land that is lonelier than a ruin."

A COLD twilight followed close upon the day. The sky was strewn with dark clouds, and a wild wind blew in my face. I was on an unknown road, and in all my life I had seen nothing so dreary.

On one side, about a hundred yards away, was the sea; on the other was a broken stretch of bare moorland covered with only the scantiest herbage and piles of barren grey rocks. Some were lying together in quaint, grotesque shapes; others stood out alone against the sky, and broken fragments of all sizes covered the ground, choking and destroying all vegetation. There was no background of woods or trees; there was nothing between that barren, stony surface and the leaden sky. What turf there had been had lost its colour, and never a fragment of moss had grown upon one of those weather-beaten boulders. The sea air had stained them, and the grey evening mists had rotted them, until their surface was honeycombed with indentations,

but neither had softened or toned down their fierce ugliness. Even in the bright sunlight such a country as this must still have been a country of desolation, and a light heart must sometimes have lost its gaiety and felt oppressed. To me, as I hurried along, with the cold evening settling down around me, that walk was horrible. Strange shadows seemed to dog my path and stalk solemnly along by my side. Footsteps seemed to follow behind me, and every stone I dislodged made me start. Sometimes I fancied that I heard strange whisperings in my ears, and I started round, shivering and trembling, to find myself alone. Once I stopped short. Was that a dead man in the way? How my heart beat! No! it was only a long boulder of rock! Listen! was not that the scream of a dying man? My own voice, raised in helpless terror, drowned the sound, and while I stood there ready to sink to the ground, a great seagull came circling round my head, and the blood flowed warm in my veins once more. How sad and mournful was that solitary cry and slow, hopeless flapping of the wings! Who was it said that the evil spirits of dead men dwell imprisoned in those sad-crying birds? It was very, very human, that cry. Bah! was I getting superstitious and faint-hearted before my task was begun? I set my teeth and stepped boldly onwards. For a while I had no more fancies.

Throughout that hideous walk my whole imagination seemed coloured with a reflection of the purpose towards which I was tending. I do not write this in any morbid fit. Few women have passed through what I have passed through; fewer still have stopped to record their sensations. It is strange that it should afford me any satisfaction to record them here, but it is so. I have begun, and I must go on. This part of my life is drawing rapidly to a close, and with its close I shall seal this little book up and put it away for ever.

The night grew darker, and the road was fast becoming little more than a rude cattle-track. A little distance ahead of me, from some building as yet unseen, a strong, clear light was steadily burning. Save for it, I might have feared that I had lost my way, for as yet I had passed no sign of human habitation. But that light was sufficient. Gomez had told me of it. It was the light which burned always, from dusk to morning, from the tower of the monastery of St. Bernard.

* * * * *

Two things seemed strange to me, or rather seem strange to me now, when I look back upon that walk. The first was my utter indifference to all physical pain. There was a hole in my boot, and I found afterwards that my foot must have been bleeding most of the time. I never felt it. I was conscious of neither pain nor fatigue. The second thing which surprises me is that,

as I drew near to my journey's end, I grew calmer. I had no desire to draw back. I had no fear. The thing which was before me never assumed any definite shape! It was there—in the background—a dim, floating purpose, never once oppressing me, never forcing its way forward in my mind for more definite consideration, and only showing itself at all in a vague, lurid glow which seemed to change even the shapes of all the gruesome surroundings of my dismal walk. Towards the end of my expedition this became even more marked. My thoughts had recoiled from the present to the past. Vague pictures of the days that had gone by seemed floating before my eyes. I saw myself in the convent garden, with all my little world enclosed in those four walls, and I heard the shrill laughter of the girls with whom I was walking, and I even fancied that I could catch the perfume of the lilac trees which drooped over the smoothly kept lawn. And then the picture faded away, and from the vessel's side I saw Cruta, a purple-topped island rising like some precious jewel from the sea! I shuddered at the memory of that face, which soon became a living dread to me, and I heard again the passionate voice of a dark-robed man reading poetry, and crushing with white, nervous fingers the hyacinths whose odour was making the air faint. I saw his white, sad face, in which the struggle of the man against himself was already born—born,

alas! in those long mornings by the sea, at my unconscious bidding! And soon Cruta, too, faded away, and you, Paul, my love, my dear, dear love, your face came to me. Almost my eyes closed, almost I stayed here to dream. Ah! how the magic of this love, this wonderful love, lightens my little world! My heart is stirred to music, my blood is dancing. I am chilled no longer. Ah! Paul, it is for you that I strike this blow, for you that I tread this stony way. It is sweet to think of it. I go on as blithely as ever village maiden stepped forward to her wedding. The way is as sweet to me as a garden of roses. Your face, too, is dying out of my thoughts, Paul. Farewell! Farewell!

* * * * *

The valley of the shadow of death! Did any one speak those words? What an evil fancy! Yet the air seemed full of whisperings. The valley of the shadow of death! Yes! it might be that, and these cold, grey boulders the spirits of the evil ones risen up out of Hades. Is there a hell, I wonder? How chill and dark the air seems! There is death about!

* * * * *

The sound of a single bell broke in upon my thoughts. I raised my eyes. My journey was accomplished. Before me was a grim, stern building, and attached to it a chapel. It was the monastery of St. Bernard.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### "ADREA'S DIARY"

"Farewell to the dead ashes of life."

THE path which I had been following led straight up to the bare, arched door of the building. I had reached it unmolested, and rang the bell.

What a hoarse, clanging sound! I shivered as I stood there listening to its gloomy echoes until they died away. No one came. The place seemed wrapped in an austere silence. I listened, but I could hear no sound within; only the dull, melancholy sighing of the wind amongst a sickly avenue of firs behind.

I stretched out my hand, and rang again. Almost before the echoes had died away I heard footsteps within. A heavy bolt was withdrawn, and a dark-robed monk stood on the threshold before me. He recoiled for a moment at seeing a woman, and I thought that he would have closed the door, but he did not.

"What would you have at this hour, sister?" he asked sternly, "The chapel is closed, and morning is the time for dispensing charity."

"I have come in search of a priest who is only a visitor here," I said. "Father Adrian he is called!"

He seemed still indisposed to admit me. "Is your business urgent?" he asked doubtfully. "Father Adrian is at his devotions, and must not be lightly disturbed."

"It is urgent," I answered.

He beckoned me to follow him, and in silence led me a few yards down a bare stone corridor. Then he threw open the door of a small room, and bade me enter.

"This is the guest-chamber," he said. "Wait here, and I will summon Father Adrian!"

He closed the door and disappeared. The interior of the room in which he had left me was bare and chilling. I turned from it to the window. Almost opposite was a small eminence, and at its summit a rude cross of Calvary. A dark figure, with clasped hands and bent head, was slowly descending the path.

Even at that distance I thought I recognised the walk, and as he came nearer I saw that he was wearing the ordinary garb of a Roman Catholic priest instead of the monk's robes. I stood close to the window watching him, and as he crossed the open space before the door he raised his eyes and saw me. How he started, and how his eyes seemed to burn in their sockets! Doubtless he would have turned paler, but he was already deathly

white. He stood there, swaying from side to side, with his eyes fastened wildly upon me, as though an apparition had appeared before him. Then he took a quick step forward; I heard the great front door creak and groan upon its hinges, and almost as soon as I could turn round he was on the threshold before me.

"Adrea! Adrea!" he cried, in a low, suppressed whisper which shook with passion. "You here! What has happened? Stand in the light! Let me see your face!"

I moved a step towards him, and raised my veil. "I am lonely," I said softly. "Was it very wrong of me to come here?"

He stood before me, with hungry, incredulous eyes fastened upon my face, as though he would see through it into my false heart. Yet I did not flinch; I was actress enough for my part. I watched him tremble—watched the colour flush into his face and die away. It was a very storm of passion which shook him before he could find the words to answer me.

"Adrea! Adrea! have you come here to mock me? As you are a woman, I implore you to spare me! Speak the truth!"

I answered him softly, with my eyes fixed upon the ground. "I came because I was lonely. Let us go away from here! Come home with me!"

"Home with you! Home with you!" He repeated my invitation. He scarcely seemed to understand.

"Yes! I was very silly the other day! I did not understand you! I did not understand myself! And you see I have humbled myself very much! I have come to tell you so! Am I forgiven?"

I raised my eyes to his, and added in a half whisper: "Won't you come home with me, and read aloud, as we used to on the rocks at Cruta?

He stood there as though fascinated. I began to feel impatient, but I dared not show any signs of it.

Suddenly he took a quick step towards me, and before I could prevent it he had thrown himself at my feet on the cold stone floor, and was holding my hands tightly in his.

"Adrea!" he cried, his voice choked with passion, "is this thing true? My brain reels with the delight of it; but, oh, forgive me if I seem to doubt! I know nothing of women, but surely your lips could never lie! You are not mocking me? Oh, Adrea, my love, lift up your eyes and swear that this is no dream. I am dizzy with joy! Speak to me! Let me look into your face! I am not doubting you, yet say it once more! Tell me it is not a dream!"

I lied to him with my face, and with my eyes, and with my lips. "It is no dream," I said softly. "I

have come to you, Adrian, because I want you. No one else would do."

He stood up, pale and shaken. His voice was still full of deep, throbbing earnestness. "Adrea!" he cried, "to-day I have been fighting a grim fight. Look into my face and mark its traces. I am desperate! For hours I have knelt on what was once a hallowed spot. In vain! In vain! On my knees before the cross of Calvary I have striven to pray, as a man wrestles for his life with the waves of a great ocean. Alas! alas! In the twilight I fancied always that your face was moving amongst the shadows, and even the breeze which rustled in the shrubs around seemed ever to be murmuring your name. Oh, my love, my love, sometimes I wonder that I have lived through the anguish of these days. But it is over! You have come to me, and the evil days are past. I renounce my priesthood! It has become only a barren farce to me! Heaven or hell, what matters it? I leave here with you to-night never to return! Never! never! never!"

He pressed hot kisses upon my hands; they stung me like molten lead, but I did not withdraw them. Then he rose up and held out his arms to me with a great yearning stealing into his dark eyes. But I kept him away.

"Not here! not here!" I cried. "I heard footsteps outside. Let us go!"

"You are right," he answered. "Wait for me; I have but few preparations to make."

He left me, and I breathed freely again. I had no fears, no hesitation. I never dreamt of turning back; but I began to find my task more difficult even than I had imagined. It was his touch, his passionate looks and words which were so hard to endure. My lips could lie, but it was hard to govern my looks; and oh, how I hated him!

Soon he was back—too soon for me; and then we left the place. He had changed his clothes, and, to my surprise, he wore an ordinary dark walking suit and a long ulster. He had discarded the priest altogether.

At the bend he looked back. There was a rift in the clouds just behind the hill of Calvary, and the rude cross stood out vividly against the sky. "At last!" he murmured; "at last! Farewell to the dead ashes of life! It is rest to have ended the struggle, even to have fallen. My new life is here!"

He touched my hand fondly, and held it within his own. "How deathly cold your hand is, Adrea!" he said. "It is the night air. You are well, are you not?" he added anxiously.

"Quite well; only tired."

He took my arm. I could not resist him, only I walked the more swiftly. He tried to check me, but I

shook my head. "I am cold and tired," I told him. "This desolate walk frightened me, and even with you I think I am a little nervous. Let us hurry. Hark! What was that?"

"A bittern in the marshes! Why, Adrea, how frightened you are! It is not like you!"

"I know it," I answered; "but to-night—to-night the air seems full of whisperings and strange sounds. Yes, I am frightened."

I shivered as I spoke. He would have drawn me closer to him, but I waved him away. How could he know anything of the horrors of that walk for me! Strange phantoms seemed ever rising from the sea, stalking across the path, and away over the moor, and passing and repassing, grinning and whispering in my ear. Sometimes it seemed as though I could have touched them by stretching out my hand; but when I tried, my fingers closed upon thin air. What were they? Why had they come to torment me? Was it because they scented an evil deed? Would they haunt me for ever like this? What folly! If I gave way so I should soon be altogether unnerved, and my task was still before me. I closed my eyes and opened them again. They had gone! It was good! I had conquered!

* * * * * *

It was late, and we had eaten and drunk together. He was lying back in an easy-chair, flushed, and

strange to say, wonderfully handsome. The hollows in his cheeks seemed suddenly filled up, and his eyes were soft and bright. I sat at his feet looking into the firelight.

"Will you answer me some questions, Adrian?" I asked. "There has been so much mystery around us lately, and, like a woman, I am curious."

"Yes, I will tell you anything," he answered. "Am I not your slave, dearest? Only ask me them quickly. There are many things I have to talk about. What was that?" he added quickly. "Is there any one else in this room?"

I shook my head. "No one; it was fancy. Tell me, who was Madame de Merteuill?"

"My mother!"

"Your mother?"

"Yes; and the old Count of Cruta is my grandfather. Madame de Merteuill is his daughter. But that is not her real name!"

There was a high screen just behind his chair,—a japanned one, which seemed to have been badly used, for there was a great hole in it. While we had been talking a strange thing had happened. A man's hand had slowly been thrust through, and a crumpled piece of paper was dropped upon the carpet. I moved to his side, and raised the cushion in his chair. Before I

could help it he had caught my face, and pressed a hot, burning kiss upon my cheek. I dared not struggle. I had to yield, and endure for a moment his passionate embrace. Then I dropped my handkerchief upon the piece of paper, and picked up both hastily.

"Will you tell me something else, please?"

"Anything you ask! You know that I will!"

"The De Vaux estates——"

"Are mine. I am the son of Martin de Vaux. Paul de Vaux has no claim at all. If I had remained in the Church, it was my intention to found a great monastery here. But now——"

"Well?"

"Everything is yours!"

"There was a moment's silence. I drew the piece of paper from my pocket, as though by accident, and read it to myself. There were only a few hastily scrawled lines:—

"I dare not do it. I am afraid. I will put the knife on the floor."

I glanced towards the hole. The hand was there, holding a long, gleaming dagger. It laid it noiselessly upon the carpet, and was withdrawn. I went over to his side, and knelt down there.

"And what will become of Paul de Vaux?" I asked.

He laughed grimly. "He must take his chance

He knows the whole story. He has known since last night. Adrea, tell me once more," he pleaded: "you never loved him really,—say that you never did!"

"Are you jealous, sir?" I asked lightly. My left hand was wandering down his side! Ah! there was his heart! How it was beating! My right hand was on the floor, cautiously feeling its way towards the screen. It reached the dagger! I clutched it by the hilt! Now was the time. There was his heart. I knew the exact spot.

"Adrea, are you ill?" he asked. "How white and strange you look! Ah!"

* * * * *

It was done! Lucrezia Borgia could not have bungled less! He lay doubled up in the chair, with a long Genoese dagger buried in his heart, and it was I who had done it!

Gomez crawled from behind the screen, and looked first at him and then at me with protruding eyes. He tried to speak, but his teeth chattered.

"It is done!" I said calmly, "and you are saved, Paul, my love," I whispered to myself. "Be a man, Gomez. We must carry it into the wood. Lift him gently; there must be no blood here."

It took all our strength to move him, and we had to drag him, yard by yard, down the avenue and across the road into the little wood.

My pen is weary of horrors. The memory of that hour is not to be written about. But when he turned away I took the flowers which he had begged for from my corsage and threw them down amongst the wet leaves. It was my sole moment of relenting.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### "THE LORD OF CRUTA"

A STRANGE figure stood on the edge of the castle cliff, looking across the bay of Cruta to the sea. He was tall, loose jointed, and gaunt, and the long grey beard and unkempt locks of flowing hair which streamed behind in the breeze showed that he was an old man; but his eyes, set back in deep hollows, and fringed with long, bushy grey lashes, were still dark and piercing. Great passions had branded his face with deep-set lines, but had failed to belittle him. On the contrary, his presence, though forbidding and awesome, was full of latent strength and dignity. To the islanders, who never mentioned their lord's name save with bated breath and after having zealously crossed themselves, he was the object of the most unbounded superstition. His personality and the strangeness of his habits appalled them. They scarcely believed him a being of the same world as their own. The most ignorant amongst them firmly believed that the sea obeyed his uplifted hand, and that when he spoke the

thunder rolled amongst the hills. When stories were told of the mystery and strange isolation in which he lived, they nodded their heads and were willing to believe everything. No one ever met him or had speech with him, for twenty years had passed since he had issued from the castle gates. But sometimes, most often when a storm was brewing, they could see a tall, dark figure standing on the giddy edge of the castle wall which overhung the sea, or walking, with slow, stately movements, up and down the narrow foot-path at the summit of the cliff. If the moon had risen, or the sky were clear beyond, they could see the huge, gaunt figure outlined with grim distinctness against the empty background, always with his face to the sea, and with a long black cloak flowing behind. It was not often that they saw him, but when they did they told one another in whispers; and though the sky were cloudless and the sea calm, the women whose husbands were out in their fishing boats beyond the bay told their beads and prayed for their safe return, and those who had remained behind prepared for rough weather. Once, at a marriage feast, when all the little village was making merry, the whisper had gone about that "the Count was walking;" and immediately they had all departed for their homes in fear and silence, and the luckless bride and bridegroom had hastened to the

priest and besought him to unloose the knot, that they might celebrate their wedding on some less ill-omened day.

To-night the storm was already breaking when the Count appeared on the castle wall and turned his face seaward. One by one the fishing smacks were crossing the gathering line of surf, and gaining the deep, still waters of the bay. As they passed underneath the towering mass of granite rock, against the base of which the waters were boiling and seething, the men in the boats gazed fearfully up at that black speck far away above their heads, and crossed themselves. The Count had stood there for an hour, they whispered, ever since that piled-up mass of angry, lurid clouds had first gathered, and a warning breath of wind had swept across the smooth, glass-like surface of the water, now troubled and restless. Not one of them doubted but that his coming had brought the storm; but there was not one of them who dared to utter a word of complaint. Only they stood up in their boats, and shielding their eyes with an uplifted hand from the fierce rays of the sinking sun, gazed out seaward, searching for the boats not yet in safety.

Suddenly a little murmur arose from amongst them, and a word was passed from one to another of their little crafts. The blinding glare of the sun and its re-

flection, stretched far away across the surface of the sea, had dazzled their eyes, and for the last quarter of an hour they had seen nothing on the westward horizon. But now the bright silver light was fading into a dull, glorious purple; and full upon its bosom a strange sail was seen, making direct for the harbour. The sunlight was still flashing upon its white sails,—little specks of gold upon a background of richer colouring—and they saw that she was a handsome, shapely-looking vessel, very different to the dirty Italian lugger which put in at their harbour for a few hours week by week.

"Will she need a pilot?" cried Francesco, rising in his boat, and watching the stranger. "Let us wait here, and see if she signals for one!"

"Let us all go! There will be something for each!" cried another.

"We will race," Antonio answered, whose boat was the fastest. The first to reach her shall have the stranger's money!"

"No, no! that is not fair," chorused the others. "We will draw lots!"

Then up rose old Guiseppe, the father of them all. He shook his head, and turned a sorrowing face seawards. "Peace! children. You are like chattering seabirds squabbling over a bait which will never be yours. Yonder ship will need no pilot! She is no stranger to Cruta!"

They looked at her, and shook their heads. "We have never seen her before," they said.

"Some of you are too young to remember her," the old man continued, "and you were all away when she was here within a twelvemonth ago! But I know her! Three times has she entered this harbour, and each time has she left sorrow and grief behind her. It is the ship of the English lord who stole away the daughter of our Count many years ago!"

There was a little murmur of suppressed wonder. Then, as though moved by a common instinct, every face was turned upward to the castle wall.

The Count had gone. But, even as they looked, he reappeared, leading another figure by the hand. They held their breath with wonder. No one had ever seen him there save alone, and now a woman stood by his side. They could see nothing of her, save her long hair flowing in the breeze, and the bare outline of her figure. "Who was she? Guiseppe must know! Who was she?" they asked him eagerly.

He shook his head. "Better not ask," he answered. Better not know! Strange things have happened up there! It is not for us to chatter of them!"

"One night as I sailed homeward," Antonio said, in a low tone, "I heard strange cries from the castle. The night was still, and the breeze brought the sound

to my ears. They came from up above, and when I strained my eyes I fancied that I could see a white figure—the figure of a woman—standing on the castle walls. She was crying for help, but suddenly, as though a hand were placed over her mouth, her cries ceased, and the figure vanished. It was three nights before the English lord died at the monastery!"

Ferdinand stood up. "On that same night," he said, in a low, hoarse whisper, "I saw a figure steal up the path to the castle. It was the English lord! On the morrow I traced him back again with drops of blood. They led right into the monastery courtyard. Two days afterwards he died."

"Silence! all of you!" commanded Guiseppe, with shaking voice. "Are these things to be spoken of thus openly? Know you not, you children, that the winds have ears, and he listens there above us."

"It is a thousand feet!" muttered Antonio. "To him our boats can seem only as specks upon the water."

"You fool!" answered Guiseppe. "Do you think that the man whose presence brings storm and wind upon us is like ordinary men? Do you think he cannot hear what he chooses!"

"Ave Maria!" cried Antonio, crossing himself. "I would as soon face the devil himself as the Count! I

shall ask Father Bernard to say a prayer for me to-night!"

"Do! and I hope his penance will be a stiff one," answered Guiseppe grimly. "Come, let us trim our sails, and get homeward. The English ship will not want us, and we can watch who lands from the beach."

"'Twould be no such bad thing if she struck on the rocks, if she brings such ill luck to the castle," muttered Antonio, as he unfurled the sail and grasped the tiller. "There would be some pickings for us, beyond doubt—some pretty pickings!"

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### "THE DAWN OF A SHORT, SWEET LIFE"

THE little group of fishing smacks, homely-looking and uncleanly, on close examination, presented a very different appearance from the deck of the English yacht fast nearing the harbour. Their brown sails had gleamed purple in the dying sunlight, and their rude outline seemed graceful and shapely as they rose and fell on the long waves. Paul, who stood on the captain's bridge of his yacht, uttered a little cry of admiration as they sailed out from the shadows of the huge rock, and fell into a rude semicircle across the bay.

"What colouring one sees in these southern waters!" he remarked. "Did you notice the glinting light on those sails?"

His companion, who was holding firmly the rail by his side, looked up and smiled. "Yes," she said softly; "it is beautiful! We have seen more beautiful things on this voyage, I think, than I ever saw before in my life. I have never been so happy! You are not angry with me now for coming, are you?"

He looked down into her wistful, upturned face, and then away to the distant line where sea and sky met. "No! I am not angry," he said softly.

Adrea was very beautiful. The fresh sea air and the southern sun had been as kind to her as to one of their own daughters. Only a very faint, delicate shade of pink had stained her clear, transparent skin, harmonising exquisitely with the slight olive hue of her complexion. The strong breeze had loosened the coils of her dark hair, and it was waving and flowing in picturesque freedom about her face. There was a change, too, in her appearance, greater than any the wind or sun could effect. Her dark eyes were glowing with a new life, and a soft, wistful joy shone in her face. Those few days had been like heaven for her. She had been alone, for the first time, with the man she loved; sailing upon a sunlit sea hour after hour, with his voice ever in her ears, and his tall figure by her side. The sense of his presence was ever upon her, bringing with it a calm, sweet restfulness, a happiness beyond anything which she had ever imagined.

And it was heaven, too, after hell! Thrust away in a dark corner of her memory was the recollection of a day and a night full of grim, phantasmal horrors, which were fast becoming little more than a dream to her. The time was not yet come for remorse. In that deep

glow of passionate and self-forgetful devotion, quickened now into fullest and sweetest life by his constant proximity, even sin itself, for his sake, seemed justified to her. Everything, too, which lay behind her brief stay in that bare, wind-swept country was fast assuming a far distant place in her thoughts. It was such a change from her little rooms in Grey Street, dainty and home-like though they had been, from the brilliantly lit drawing-rooms where she had performed, and the same wearisome compliments ever in her ears. The bonds of town life had always galled her. She was an artist, although she had denied it. She had become subject to her environment but it had been an imprisonment. Nature was her mother, and Nature had claimed her now. She knew it all; she knew that she could never be a dancer again. She had stolen out on to the deck each morning in her slippers, and had seen the dawn break through the clouds and descend upon the quivering waters. She had seen the eastern sky streaked with faint but marvellous colouring, growing deeper and deeper, until the sun's rim had risen from out of the water. Grey had become mauve, and white amber. It was wonderful! And by night she had leaned over the side of the yacht, and looked up into a sky ablaze with trembling stars, casting their golden reflections down upon the boundless waves

which rose and fell beneath—waves which were sometimes green, and sometimes golden in the wonderful phosphoric light which touched them with a weird splendour. It was like the opening of a new world to Adrea. All that had gone before seemed harsh and artificial! It was the dawn of a new life.

Paul had noticed the change. To him it had appeared chiefly as an increased womanliness, a gentle softness of speech and mannerism very charming and attractive. Those few days at sea together had been like a dream to him. He had come on board as nearly broken-hearted as a strong man could be, and fiercely anxious to reach his destination and know the whole, cruel truth. In a few hours all had been changed. His sorrows seemed numbed. He was no longer battling alone with his grief. Adrea knew all, and as they sailed southwards together, the sense of the present was strong enough to drive past and future from his thoughts. The clouds cleared from his face, and his heart was lightened. It was Adrea who had saved him from despair.

He thought of this as she stood by his side, and he answered her question. Before their eyes, Cruta was rising up from the sea. The grim castle was there, looking as old as the rocks on which it was perched, the wide, open harbour, and the little fleet

of fishing smacks. The seabirds circled about their heads; every moment brought the rocky little island more distinctly into view. Paul looked down into Adrea's face gravely.

"It is our destination, Adrea," he said. "You must go now. There will be a lot of surf crossing the bar, and I shall have enough to do to run her in. Look behind! It is just as well we are going into harbour!"

He pointed to the fast-gathering clouds coming up from the westward, and she paused with her foot on the ladder. "We leave the storm behind us," she said. "There is fair weather ahead!"

She went down into her cabin, and left Paul upon the bridge, with his eyes fixed upon the castle. Fair weather ahead! How dared he hope for it! The sun had finally disappeared now, but some part of the afterglow still lingered in curious contrast to the lurid yellow and black clouds hurrying on behind him. The old castle was bathed for a moment in a sea of purple light,—every line of it, and the huge rock which it crowned, standing out with peculiar vividness against the empty background. But it was a brief glory. Even while Paul was gazing, the colouring faded away, and it resumed its former aspect. Fair weather ahead! Every moment, as mem-

ories of his former visit to the place thronged in upon him, Paul doubted it the more.

He was close to the entrance of the harbour now, and all his thoughts and energies were required to pilot his yacht safely. In a few moments the brief line was passed, and the islanders waiting about upon the beach saw the English vessel ride smoothly into harbourage under shadow of the huge castle rock. Presently she dropped an anchor, and swung gracefully round. A boat was lowered, and made for the shore.

There were plenty of hands willing to help pull her in. Paul stepped out on to the beach, and looked around for some one to whom he could make himself understood.

They were all islanders of the rudest class; but seeing no one else, Paul lifted his hand to the castle, and asked them the way in Italian. They understood him, and pointed along the beach to a point where a rude road curved inland, and reappeared a little higher up in zigzag fashion behind the rocks. But no one offered to go a step with him. On the contrary, directly the question had left his lips, they all shrunk away, whispering and exclaiming amongst themselves.

"It is the son of the Englishman!" cried Antonio. "He is going into the lion's mouth! Do not let us be seen with him. The Count may be watching."

"I wonder if he knows his danger?" Guiseppe said thoughtfully. "He is young and brave looking. It would be a good action to warn him."

"I would not risk it!" cried Antonio.

"Nor I!" echoed Ferdinand.

"Nor I!" chorused the others.

Guiseppe glanced at them in contempt. Then he stepped forward and laid his hand upon Paul's shoulder —a strange, picturesque-looking object, in his bright scarlet shirt, and trousers turned up to his knees. He had been in Italy once, and he tried to speak the language of that country as well as he could.

"Illustrious Englishman!" he said, "go not to that castle, the home of the Count of Cruta. Danger lurks there for you—danger and death. It is our lord who lives there; we are his vassals, and we are dumb. But he is wild and fierce, and your countrymen are like devils to him. Strange things have happened up there. Be wise. Put back your boat, weigh your anchor and sail away. The stormy seas are dangerous, but not so dangerous as the Castle of Cruta to an Englishman of your features. Take the word of Guiseppe, and depart!"

Paul shook his head. He understood most of what Guiseppe had said, and he knew that it was kindly meant. "You are very good," he said. "I thank you for your warning; but I have important business with

the Count, and I have come from England on purpose to see him. Here, spend this for me," he added, throwing a handful of silver money amongst the little group of men. "Yonder path will take me straight to the castle, I suppose. Good evening."

He strode away along the beach alone. Meanwhile a strange thing was happening. The islanders were all gathered eagerly around the little shower of money, but not one had offered to touch a piece.

"Holy Mother! there are fifty pieces!" cried Antonio. "If only I was sure that the Count would not see me! I would keep holiday for a month, and start again with a fresh set of fishing nets."

"Touch not the money!" advised Guiseppe, shaking his head. "The Count's eyes are everywhere!"

"It is very hard!" groaned Ferdinand. "It has been such a bad season, too!"

"I know! I know!" cried Antonio excitedly. We will go to the monastery, and get Father Bernard to come and bless it. He will claim half for the Church, but we can divide the other half, and we shall, each man, have given six pieces in charity. What say you? shall we go?"

"Bravo! Antonio is right! Antonio is a sensible fellow!" they all cried. Then there was the sound of bare feet scampering over the hard sands as they

hastened up to the monastery. Guiseppe was left alone.

He waited until they were out of sight. Then he stooped down, and carefully collecting all the coins, placed them in his pouch. "Ignorant fools!" he muttered. "The Count can see no further than other men, and at any rate he will not see these in my pocket."

He stood up, and gazed steadily along the path which Paul had taken. "What am I to do now?" he continued. "It is to the Englishman's father that I owe my boat and my little hoard of savings. He behaved to me as a prince, did Signor de Vaux. Can I see his son hasten yonder to his doom without one effort to save him? No. The Count is terrible, but I need run no risk. At any rate, I will follow a little way."

He walked swiftly along the beach, and commenced the ascent to the castle. In a few minutes the little band of fishermen returned, carrying lanterns in their hands, and with a priest walking amongst them. They reached the spot, and paused, while the priest commenced to mumble a prayer. He was scarcely halfway through when he was interrupted.

"The money is gone!" cried Antonio.

"Every piece!" echoed Ferdinand.

There was a moment's blank silence. Then they all crossed themselves. "Let us go home," whispered

Antonio hoarsely. "The Count knows. He has been here."

The priest turned away disgusted, and the others followed him, talking with bated breath amongst themselves. And, in the darkness, no one noticed Guiseppe's absence.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### "A VOICE AND FIGURE FROM THE DISTANT PAST"

It was a long, steep ascent, hewn out of the solid rock; but at last Paul stood before the great gates of the castle, and paused to take breath. Hundreds of feet below him his yacht was riding at anchor, looking like a toy vessel upon a painted sea, and a little group of scattered lights showed him where the hamlet lay. Before him was the stern, massive front of the castle, wrapped in profound gloom, but standing out in clear, ponderous outline against the starlit sky. There seemed to be no light from any part of it, and the great iron gates leading into the courtyard were closed. Nor was there any sound at all, not even the barking of a dog. It was like a dwelling of the dead.

A great, rusty bell-chain hung by the side of the gate, and as there seemed to be no other means of communication with the interior, Paul pulled it vigorously. Its hoarse echoes had scarcely died away before several rough-looking islanders, carrying flaring oil lamps, trooped into the courtyard from the rear of

the building, and one of them, drawing the bolts, threw open the gates.

"I have come to see the Count," Paul said, addressing the nearest of them. "Will you conduct me to him?"

The man replied energetically, but in a *patois* utterly unintelligible. He led the way across the courtyard towards the castle, however, and Paul followed close behind. They did not enter by the front, but by a low, nail-studded door at the extreme corner of the tower, which the man immediately closed and locked behind him.

Paul looked around him curiously, but in the semi-darkness there was little to see. He was in a corridor, of which the walls were simply whitewashed, and the floor bare stone; but as they passed onward, down several passages, and up more than one flight of steps, the proportions of the place expanded. The ceilings grew loftier, and the corridors wider. Yet there was no attempt anywhere at decoration or furniture of any sort. The place was like an early-day prison—huge, bare, and damp. Once, crossing a balustraded corridor, there was a view of a huge hall down below, bare save for a few huge skins thrown carelessly around, and a great stack of firearms and other weapons which lined the walls on either side. It was the only sign of habitation that Paul had seen.

Suddenly his guide paused, and held up his finger. Paul, too, listened; and close at hand he heard, to his surprise, the muffled sound of voices chanting some sad hymn in a deep minor key. The rise and fall of those mournful voices was wonderfully impressive. What could it mean? It was a dirge, a funeral hymn! Its every note seemed to breathe of death.

"What is that?" Paul asked. "Is any one ill—dying?"

The man shook his head. He could not understand. He only motioned to Paul to move silently, and hurried on. They were in a wide corridor, with disused doors on either side, but their feet fell no longer upon the bare stone. A rough sort of drugget had been hastily thrown down in the centre of the passage, and their movements roused no more strange echoes between the bare walls and the vaulted roof. At every step forward they took the chanting grew more distinct, and at last the man stopped at the end of the passage before a door, softly tapped at it. It was opened at once, and Paul found himself ushered into a great, dimly lit bedchamber.

He glanced around him with keen interest. If the interior of the room was a little dilapidated, it was full of the remains of past magnificence. The walls were still covered with fine tapestry, of which the design

was almost obliterated, although the texture and colouring still remained. The furniture was huge, and of the fashion of days gone by, and the bedstead was elaborately carved and surmounted by a coat of arms. Further Paul had but little opportunity to discover, for as soon as his presence became known in the room, a black-cowled monk left the bedside and approached him.

"We have been expecting you," he said in Italian, "and we fear now that you come too late. Our poor lady is beyond human skill!"

Paul looked at him in astonishment. "I do not quite understand you! It is the Count of Cruta whom I came to see!"

The priest started back, and commenced fumbling with a lamp which stood on a table at the foot of the bed. "Are you not the German doctor from Palermo?" he asked, bending over towards Paul, with his keen, dark face alight with suspicion and distrust.

Paul shook his head. "I am no doctor at all!" he answered. "I am an Englishman, and my name is Paul de Vaux!"

"Ah!" There was a faint, incoherent cry from the bed—a cry, which, faint though it was, shook with stifled emotion. Both men turned round, and Paul could see that the other's face was dark and stern.

The woman, who had been lying on the bed still and motionless as a corpse, had raised herself with a sudden, spasmodic movement. Her cheeks were sunken to the bone, and her eyes were large and staring.

The seal of death was upon her face, but Paul recognised her. It was the woman whom he had seen last in the drawing-room of Major Harcourt's house, the woman whom Adrea had called her stepmother.

He took a sudden step forward, and she held out her hands in a gesture half of welcome, half of fear. "Paul de Vaux! Holy Mother of God! What has brought you here—here into the tiger's den? Come close to me! Hasten!"

Paul stepped forward, but the priest stood between them, holding out his hands in a threatening gesture. "Sister, forbear!" he cried sternly. "You have made your peace with God; you have done with the world and all its follies. Close your eyes and pray. Fix your thoughts upon things above!"

She did not heed him. She did not even look towards him. Her eyes were fixed upon Paul, and he read their message aright.

"This woman wishes to speak to me. Stand aside, and let me go to her!" he exclaimed. "If she be indeed dying, surely you should respect her wishes."

He spoke imperatively, for the priest stood in the

way, and prevented his approach; pointing towards the door with a stern, commanding gesture.

"There must be no converse between you and this woman!" he said. "I am no lover of violent deeds; but if you insist upon forcing your way to her bedside, I shall summon the Count, and you will pay for your rashness with your life. Your name and features are a certain death warrant in this house. Escape while you may, and *pax vobiscum.* Remain and I cannot save you!"

Paul glanced round the room. Two monks were standing with lighted tapers on the further side of the bed, one of whom was mumbling a Latin prayer. The man who had brought him here was gone. There was no one else in the room, except the priest and himself.

"You are inhuman!" he said shortly. "The prayers of a dying woman are more to me than your threats. Stand on one side!'

Paul laid his hand heavily upon the priest's shoulder. He was prepared even to have used force had it been necessary, but it was not. The latter moved away at once, shaking his robes free from Paul's touch with contemptuous gesture, and calling one of the monks to him, Paul sank on one knee by the side of the dying woman, and bent low down over her.

"Madame de Merteuill, you have something to say to me!' he whispered. What is it?"

Her voice was very low and very faint. She was even then upon the threshold of death. Each word came out with a painful effort, but with a curious distinctness. I am not Madame de Merteuill at all! I am the daughter of the Count of Cruta!"

She paused to gather fresh strength, and Paul caught hold of some of the bedclothes, and clutched them in his fingers convulsively. This woman, the daughter of the Count of Cruta! this wan, faded creature, the girl whom his father had borne away in triumph! His brain reeled with the wonder of it! If only he had known a few weeks ago! She should never have left the Hermitage until she had told him everything! Was it too late now? She was trying to speak to him. Was he upon the brink of a tremendous revelation? Was the whole past about to be made clear? Oh! if the old Count would keep away for awhile.

Her lips commenced to move. He bent close over her, determined not to lose a syllable. "You know the story about your father, Martin de Vaux and me. I——"

"Yes, yes! I know!" he assured her softly. "I have only heard it lately!"

"From whom?"

"From the priest who was always with you at De Vaux,—from your son!" he added, as the truth sud-

denly swept in upon him. Yes; Father Adrian was this woman's son!

Her corpse-like face was fixed steadily upon him. Her words were monotonous and slow, yet they preserved their distinctness. "You have come here to know the truth of the story he told you?"

"Yes; I have come to discover it, if I can!"

"The holy Saints must have brought you to me. The story——"

"Yes?"

"The story is false!"

Paul bent lower still, with strained hearing. There had been a plot, then, after all. Oh, if she should die without finishing her story! He looked into her bloodless face, and his pulses throbbed at fever-heat.

"You know my story," she murmured. "I commence at the time when I left your father in Paris. I had thought myself hardened in my sin; I was mistaken. Repentance crept slowly but surely in upon me immediately after my father's visit to us. His words haunted me. I began to steal away in the evening to vespers at the Church of St. Cecilia. One night a grave, sweet-faced priest stood up in the pulpit; and as his words sank into my heart my sin rose up before me black and grim, and the burden of it grew intolerable. After the service I sought him, and I confessed.

On the morrow I left Martin secretly and without adieu. Count Hirsfeld aided my escape. I came here!

"I came, hoping for forgiveness; but he, my father, could not forget the past. I found him living in grim and fierce solitude, shunned and dreaded by every one, ever brooding over my sin and his dishonour. He made me stay, yet he cursed me.

"Six months after my arrival Adrian was born. It was while I lay between life and death that I wrote that letter to your father. Afterwards I told my father what I had done. The letter lay there; I dared not send it without my father's sanction. I sent for him and told him all. To my surprise, he consented. He did more than that; he spoke of it to Count Hirsfeld, and the Count volunteered to take the letter to England. Their readiness made me worried and anxious. I knew how they hated Martin de Vaux, and I was suspicious. I called the doctor to my side, and questioned him closely. He declared solemnly that I could not live a fortnight; it was impossible. I put my suspicions away. It was for the honour of his name that my father had consented to receive Martin beneath his roof; there could be no other reason. And I myself felt that the end was near. My body was cold, and there was a deadly faintness, against which I was al-

ways struggling. I dreaded only lest he should come too late!

"It was only the night before his arrival that I learnt the truth. I was lying with my eyes closed, and they thought that I was asleep. The doctor and my father were talking together in whispers. The crisis was over, I heard them say. In a few days Adrian would be born, and I should speedily recover, if all went well. I nerved myself, and called my father to me. I had overheard, I said; if Martin came, I would not marry him. His anger was terrible. Both Count Hirsfeld and he had known from the commencement that I was likely to recover, but they wished to see Martin tricked into marrying me. I was firm; I would not consent! I had written that letter believing myself to be dying. If Martin came, I would not see him now. If he was forced into my presence, I should tell him the truth.

"My father left me, speechless with rage. For the next week my door was kept carefully locked, and no one but the doctor and the nurse were permitted to enter. Yet I learnt afterwards all that happened. Marie, my maid, who was slowly dying of consumption, was moved into the principal bedchamber; and when Martin arrived, she was made to personate me. It was the priest who gained her consent; the priest who confessed

her and gave her absolution. His share of the spoil was to be the De Vaux estates, handed over to the Church if ever they carried out their plot successfully. Martin came, and, as he thought, granted that fervent prayer of mine. They stood around him with drawn swords; they would not allow him to approach the bed. As soon as the ceremony was over, he was thrust from the castle.

"It happened that in less than a week Marie died. From my bed, which faced the window, I saw the little funeral procession leave the castle—my father and Count Hirsfeld the chief mourners. I saw Martin following away off, with sorrowing face, and I was glad then that I had not deceived him. I saw him weeping over the grave which he believed to be mine. The day afterwards my son was born.

"As soon as Adrian could crawl about, he was taken from me by the priests. They sent him to Italy, where he grew up a stranger to me. When he returned, I did not know him. I spoke to him of that false marriage; I wept for his lack of parentage. He knew everything; he spoke to me of it coldly, but without unkindness. He was a son of the Church, he said; he needed no other mother.

"He dwelt for awhile at the monastery, and it was while he was there that I became suspicious. My

father, and he, and the Superior of the monastery were always together. They seemed to be urging something upon him, which he was loth to undertake. By degrees I found it all out. Adrian was to go to England as my lawful son and claim the De Vaux estates for the Church. At first he was unwilling; but by degrees they won upon him. Warning was sent to Martin de Vaux, and he came here swiftly—to his death! I was kept a close prisoner, but I found out everything that was happening. For years afterwards, Adrian was undecided whether to go to England and claim the estates. At last he decided, unknown to me, to go. I escaped and followed him. I tried my best to persuade him, but failed. I came back here ill—to die—to die!"

"And Adrea?"

"Adrea? She knew nothing! How could she?"

"Do you know who Adrea was?"

She seemed surprised that anything else could, for a moment, occupy his mind after the story to which he had listened; but she struggled to answer him. She was Count Hirsfeld's daughter! He never spoke to me of her mother! It was in Constantinople. I am afraid——"

He bowed his head. "I understand," he said simply. The colour had suddenly flooded into his

cheeks, and there was a mist before his eyes. Even in that supreme moment, when her senses were failing and her eyes were growing dim, she saw and understood.

"I wanted to be kind to her always," she faltered. "We would have adopted her, but she would not stay here. She was unhappy, and I helped her to escape. I had my reasons!"

He had already guessed at them, and he held out his hand. He did not wish to hear any more. There was a moment's silence. She was looking at him with dim, wistful eyes.

"You—you are very like your father!" she said, painfully. "Will you kiss me?"

He stooped down and kissed the pale, trembling lips, and held her hands tightly. Her breath was coming fast, and she spoke with difficulty.

"Thank God they brought you here instead of the doctor! I can die—at peace now! But you—you are in danger! You must escape from here! You must not lose a minute! Oh, you do not know! you do not know! The Count is cruel—bitterly cruel! He will not come to me although I die. He will not forgive, although I have suffered agonies! He is my father but he will not forgive me. And you—you are in danger if he finds you! They have gone for him! Ah! I re-

member! Father Andrew went for him! He is afraid that I shall tell you the truth, and that the Church will not gain your property. Quick! you must go! Kiss me once more, Paul, and go! Go quickly! These monks are wolves, but they are cowards! Strike them down if they try to stop you! Don't hurt my father! Farewell! farewell!"

"I will stay with you till the end," Paul whispered.

"No, no! away! I cannot die in peace and think of you—in danger. I want to pray. Leave me, now, Paul. Dear Martin! Martin, my love—is it you?"

Her mind was wandering, and she saw her lover of old days in the man whose hand she clasped so frantically; and Paul, although out in the passage he could hear the sound of hurrying feet, could not tear himself away from her dying embrace. A faint, curious smile was parting her pallid lips, and her dim eyes seemed suddenly to have caught a dim reflection of the light to come.

"Martin! Martin! there is a mist everywhere—but I see you, dear love! Wait for me! Let us go hand in hand—hand in hand through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Oh, my love! it has been a weary, weary while. Hold me tighter, Martin! I cannot feel your hand! Ah! at last, at last! Farewell sorrow, and grief, and suffering! We are together once more —a new world—behind the clouds! I am happy."

## CHAPTER XXXV

### "FROM OUT LIFE'S THUNDERS TO A STRANGE, SWEET WORLD"

SHE was dead, and, after all, her end had been crowned with peace. She did not hear the door thrown roughly open, the swelling of angry voices, or the fast-approaching tramp of many feet. Nor did Paul heed any of these signs of coming danger; he had folded his strong arms around her, and his lips, pressed close to her, seemed to draw the last quivering breath from her frail body. It was only when her head sunk back, and he knew that she was dead, that he laid her reverently down and turned around.

The room was full of strange flashes of light and grotesque shadows falling upon the white faces of half a dozen monks. Standing in front of them was Father Andrew, and by his side was an old man, tall and straight, with snow-white beard and hair. He stood in full glare of a torch held by one of the monks behind him, and his face seemed like the face of a corpse, save for the steady, malignant light in his jet-

black eyes. As Paul turned round, with his features suddenly visible in a stream of lurid light, he raised his arm and pointed a long, skinny finger steadily towards him.

"The son of the devil!" he cried, his deep, tremulous voice awakening strange echoes in the high vaulted chamber. "Welcome! Welcome! Thrice welcome!"

Paul straightened himself, and reverently laid the little white hand which he had been clasping across the coverlet. "She is dead!" he said solemnly. "What I came here to learn from you, I have learnt from her. Let me go!"

He moved a step forward, but the old man remained there in the way, motionless, and around the door were gathered a solid phalanx of monks. Paul halted, conscious at once of his danger. The white faces of the monks were all bent upon him, full of savage, animal ferocity, and a gleam of something still worse lit up the dark eyes of that old man. Their very silence was unnatural and oppressive. Paul bore it, looking round amongst them with questioning eyes, until he could bear it no longer.

"Am I a prisoner?" he cried. "What do you want with me? Speak! some of you! Count of Cruta, answer me!"

A dull, hollow laugh echoed through the chamber. Paul turned away, sick with horror. It was like being in the power of a hoard of madmen. The air of the place, too, seemed suddenly to have become stifling. The perspiration was standing out upon his forehead in great beads. It was a relief when the Count spoke.

"You have done well, Paul de Vaux, to find your way here—here into the very presence of a dying woman, and force from her lips a confession that has made you glad. You think that you will go back now to your country, and cheat me of my well-planned vengeance. You will hold up your head once more; you will mock at the Church's rights. You will go your way through the world rich and honoured; you will call yourself by an old name. You will pluck all the roses of life. Worthy son of a worthy father! Look at me! Who was it who blasted my life, my happiness, my honour, my name? A name grander and older than his, as the oak is older and grander than the currant bush. When he took my daughter into his arms, he wrote the funeral of his race! I played with him, as a tiger plays with a miserable Hindoo! When life was sweetest to him, I struck. He came here for mercy; I laughed, and I was merciful. I stabbed him to the heart. The knife hangs

side by side with the arms of the Crusaders of Cruta. You are his son! You are the next to die! You will not leave these walls alive! These monks know you! It is you who hold the lands of De Vaux, which by right belong to their Holy Church. You would go back to resist their just claims! The good of the Church demands that you should not go back! You shall not go back! The Count of Cruta demands that you shall not go back. You shall not go back! You shall be slain, even where your father was slain, but you shall not creep back to your hole to die! Your bones shall whiten and shrivel upon the rocks. Your blood shall be an honoured stain upon my floor. Monks of Cruta! there he stands! He who alone can resist your just possession of the broad lands and abbey of De Vaux. The despoiled Church cries to you to strike. The end is great! Haul him away!"

They were around him like a pack of wolves, their lean faces hungry and fierce, and their long, skinny fingers clutching at his throat and at his clothing. One silently drew a knife and brandished it over him. Paul wrenched himself free with a tremendous effort, but they were upon him again. They forced him slowly backwards, backwards even across the bed where that dead woman lay with her eyes as yet unclosed. The great heat, as much as their numbers, was overpowering him.

His eyes were bloodshot, and there was a choking in his throat. Again the long knife was lifted; other hands held him motionless, ready for the blow. He was too weak to struggle now. He saw the blue steel quivering in the air. Then he closed his eyes.

What was that? There was a shrill cry from one of the monks, and Paul, finding their grasp relaxed, started up. They were cowering down like a flock of frightened animals. The room seemed full of red fire. The glass in the windows cracked; it flew into pieces, and a column of smoke curled in. The door was thrown open; Guiseppe stood for a moment on the threshold.

"Fly!" he cried. "Fly! The castle is on fire. The flames are near!"

They rushed for the door like panic-stricken cattle before a great prairie fire, biting and trampling upon one another in their haste. Paul followed, but the old Count stood in his way, trembling, not with fear, but with anger.

"Cowards! beasts!" he cried after the flying monks. "But you shall not escape me!"

He wound his long arms around his enemy, but the strength of his manhood was gone, and without effort Paul threw him on one side. Then, through the smoke, he found himself face to face with Guiseppe.

"This way, Signor!" he said coolly. "Follow me closely!"

The old Count was up again, and seemed about to attack them. Suddenly he changed his mind, and with a hoarse cry, ran down an empty corridor. Guiseppe and Paul turned in the opposite direction.

"We must fly, Signor!" the man cried. "He goes to the cellars! He is a devil! He will blow up the castle! Cover up your nose and your mouth!"

They hurried along wide, deserted corridors, down stone stairs, and finally reached what seemed to be a circular underground passage. Round and round they went, until Paul's head swam; but the air was cooler, and every moment brought relief. Suddenly there was a cold breeze. They turned one more corner, and Guiseppe stopped. They were in an open aperture facing the sea, barely twenty feet below. A small boat with a single man in it was there waiting.

"Dive!" cried Guiseppe. "We must not wait for the rope!"

Over they went almost simultaneously. The shock of the cold water sent the blood dancing once more through Paul's veins. He came to the surface just after his guide, cool and refreshed. They scrambled into the boat, and Paul gave a little cry of wonder. They were drifting on a sea of ruddy gold, and the space all around them was brilliant with the reflection. High above, the flames were leaping up towards the sky, and the dull sing-song of their roar set the very

air vibrating. Guiseppe, still dripping, seized an oar.

"Pull, for your lives! pull!" he cried anxiously.

His companion shrugged his shoulders. "But why?"

"Ask no questions! You will see!"

They did see. They were barely half-way to the yacht, when there came the sound of a low, rumbling from the castle. Suddenly it broke into a roar. Belching sheets of flame burst out on every side. Huge cracks in that brilliant light were suddenly visible in the walls, creeping in a jagged line from the foundation to the turret. Fragments of the stone work flew outwards and upwards. It seemed as though some mighty internal force were splitting the place up. The men in the boat sat breathless and transfixed. Only Guiseppe whispered: "It is the old Count! He is the devil! He has blown the place up!"

There was another, and then a series of explosions. Fragments of the rock and stone fell hissing into the water scarcely a hundred feet away. Great waves rolled towards them. It seemed as though the earth underneath were shaking. Then it all died away, and there was silence. Only the blackened walls of the castle remained, with the dying flames still curling fitfully around them. The air grew darker, and the colour faded from the sea.

"It is the last of the Count of Cruta, and his castle of horrors!" cried Guiseppe. "God be thanked!"

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### "LOVE THAN DEATH ITSELF MORE STRONG"

I HAD no thought of writing in you again, my silent friend. Only a little while ago I said to myself, the time has gone by when solitude and heart-hunger could drive me to your pages for consolation. Only a little while ago, it is true; and yet between the past and future is fixed a mighty gulf, As I write these words I stand upon the threshold of death! What death may mean, I know not! I have no religion to throw bright gleams of hope upon its dark mysteries. I have no hope of any other life, save the one I am quitting! If I am resigned and calm, it is because the lamp of my life has burnt out, and I am in darkness. I wait for death as a maiden waits for the first gleams of dawn on her marriage day.

Who said that love was everlasting? They lied! Love is a dream, a floating shadow full of golden lights, quenched by the first breath of morning! Who should know, if I do not know? Who has done more for love than I—I whose hands are red with blood, I who this

night must die? It was for his sake, I struck—for his sake! and now that the hour of my punishment must come, I sit here alone and forsaken, waiting for the signal which must end my life! It was for his sake! A death-white face rises up before me, and a hoarse, dying cry sobs ever in my ears! I pass on my way through the Valley of the Shadow of Death with no hope to cheer me, forsaken, friendless, and shaken with dim fears! Am I alone! He for whom I struck has turned from me. Oh, the bitter cruelty of it! It was he who taught me what love was, and yet of love he knows nothing, else I would not be here to meet my doom alone! Oh! Paul, Paul! Oh, for one touch of your hand, for one kind look! My heart is sick and faint with longing! Am I indeed so low and vile a thing that you should turn away with never a single word of farewell? Oh! my love, you are hard indeed! If my hands are stained with blood—for whose sake was it? It was only a word I craved for, Paul! only a word—a look, even! Was it too great a boon to grant?

* * * * *

Oh, memory! help me, help me to keep sane just a few more hours—until the end comes. It is a last luxury! I will think of those golden days we spent together ere the blow fell. Ah! how happy we were! Every breath of life was sweet; every moment seemed charged

with the delicious happiness! The past, with its haunting shadows, and the memory of that grim, deathly figure huddled up amongst the ferns in the bare pine wood had perished. Background and foreground had vanished in the bewildering joys of the present. Oh! Paul, that was happiness indeed. All measures of outside things seemed lost! At times I found it hard to recollect in what country we were! Oh! the world, such as ours was, is a sweet, sweet world!

At last the blow fell. He came to me one morning, as white as a sheet, with an old, soiled copy of the *Times* in his hand.

"Read, Adrea, he cried, thrusting it into my hand. "A horrible thing has happened!"

I let the paper fall through my fingers. An agony of fear was upon me. "I know! I know! Do not ask me to read it."

"You knew, and you did not tell me!"

"No! I—No!"

There was a deadly swimming before my eyes, and a throbbing in my ears. I sank back, grateful for the unconsciousness which gave me respite, however short. When I recovered, I was on the verge of a fever; and Paul, seeing my condition, did not refer to the news which had been such a shock to him. But for an hour the next day he was away from me, writing letters home. When he returned there was a restraint between us.

He was kind as ever, but restless and unsettled. As yet he had no suspicion, but I could see that he was longing to get back to England. . . . The thought was like madness to me.

Then came the beginning of the end. We were staying in a villa which we had rented for a month near Florence, and one day we drove into the city together to do some shopping. Paul was at the post-office, and I was crossing the square to go to him, when of a sudden I felt a hand upon my dress, and a hoarse whisper in my ear. I started round in terror. A man, pale and hollow-eyed, stood by my side. It was Gomez!

"Listen quickly!" he said. "I must not stay by your side! You are in danger! The English police are upon your track!"

I caught hold of the railing to prevent myself from falling. Above my head, a little flock of pigeons lazily flapped their wings against the deep blue sky. All around, the sunlit air was full of laughing voices, and gaily dressed crowds of people were passing backwards and forwards only a few yards away. Already, one or two were glancing in my direction curiously. In a moment Paul would come out of the postoffice, looking for me. I made a great effort, and steadied myself.

"Tell me! What can I do?"

He answered me quickly, keeping his back turned to the stream of people. "You must fly! It may be already too late, but in twenty-four hours you will certainly be arrested if you are in Florence. I have travelled night and day to find you. The holy saints grant that it may not be too late. Call yourself by a strange name; and if Paul de Vaux be with you, see that he alters his also. There are already two of the detectives in Florence searching for you. A third, with a warrant, may be here at any time. Get to the furthest corner of the world, for everything is known. Farewell!"

He left me abruptly; and although I felt that my doom had been spoken, I walked firmly across the square to meet Paul. I would tell him everything. He should be my judge. My love should plead for me! It would triumph; yes! it would triumph! I was convinced of it! As for the danger I was in, I thought less of that.

On the steps of the postoffice I met Paul. He held in his hand a bundle of papers, one of which he had opened, and, as he raised his head and looked at me, I saw that what I had dreaded had come to pass. He looked like a man stricken down by some sudden and

terrible blow. He was white even to the lips, and a strange light burned in his eyes.

He laid his hand upon my arm. Was it my fancy, or did he really recoil a little as he touched me? "Let us go home!" he said hoarsely. "I have—something to say to you!"

We entered the carriage, which was waiting near, and drove off. We came together into this room. It was barely two hours ago. He closed the door and turned towards me. I did not wait for his question. I told him everything!

Ah me! I had thought that love was a different thing. I had sinned, it is true, but he was not my judge. So I commenced, humbled and sorrowful indeed, but with no fear of what was before me. But gradually, as I watched his face, a cold, ghastly dread crept in upon me. What did it mean—that blank look of horror, his quiet withdrawal from the only caress I attempted? I finished—abruptly—and called out to him piteously,—

"Paul! Paul! Why do you turn away? Oh! kiss me, Paul! It was horrible, but it was to save you!"

He did not answer; he did not hold out his arms, or make any movement towards me. I touched his arm; and oh! horrible! he shuddered. I crept away into a

corner of the room, with a strange, burning pain in my heart.

"How long is it, since you saw Gomez?" he asked, and his voice, strained, yet low, seemed to come from a far distance.

"An hour!—perhaps more—I cannot tell!"

He stood before the door like a ghost. "I must go and try to find him! Forgive me, Adrea! I cannot talk now! I will come back!"

So he left me. I have not seen him since! God only knows whether I shall see him again! My heart is torn with the agony of it! I cannot bear it any longer! If he is not here in half an hour I shall end it!

* * * * *

He has not come! Ten minutes more!

Five minutes!

* * * * *

It is done; I have taken poison! In half an hour I shall be dead! Oh! Paul, my love, my love, come to me! If I could only die in your arms, if I could only feel once more your kisses upon my lips! It is horrible to die alone! Already I feel weaker! Oh! if there be a God in heaven, send me Paul just for one last moment! I do not ask for forgiveness or pardon, only send me Paul! I am afraid to die alone! Never

to see him again! Oh! I shall cry out! Paul! Paul! come to me! I do not ask for heaven, only to die in his arms, to——

* * * * *

There were sounds upon the stairs, and in the hall; the sounds of a man's quick entrance and approach. Adrea, with that passionate prayer still quivering upon her lips, dragged herself to the door and listened. A moment's agonised apprehension, and then she staggered back, faint with joy. The door was opened, and quickly closed; Paul stood before her.

"Oh! my love! my love" she murmured. "Take me in your arms! It is for the last time!"

He moved to her side, and supported her. "Adrea," he said quietly, "I want you to change your things quickly, and come with me. There is a carriage at the door, and I have chartered a steamer to take us to Genoa. From there we can sail to-morrow for New York. Gomez was right; you are in danger here! Be brave, little woman, and all will be well!"

She clung to him passionately, with her arms locked around his neck, and her wet face close to his. Only a confused sense of his words reached her. His tone and his embrace were sufficient.

"And you?"

"I go with you, of course! We shall begin a new

life in a new world! Come! We have no time to lose!"

"A new life in a new world." She repeated the words dreamily, still holding him to her. Then a sudden dizziness came. It passed away, but it reminded her that the end could not be far off.

"Adrea, do you not understand? How cold your lips are! Try and bear up, love! We have a long journey before us!"

She shook her head slowly. He began to notice that she was like a dead weight in his arms.

"It is a long journey, love, but I go alone. You cannot come, Paul! Yet I am not afraid, now that you are here!"

"Adrea! what do you mean? I will not leave you! Have courage! Adrea! Soon we shall leave all dangers behind us!"

"Paul! do you not understand? I am dying!"

Dying! He looked at her face, calm and even smiling, but terribly blanched and white, and he saw the empty phial upon the table. The whole truth swept in upon him. He staggered and almost fell with her.

"It is best so," she whispered. "I only minded when—I thought that you might not be back in time. I am quite—content now!"

"A doctor!" he cried hoarsely. "I must fetch a doctor! Adrea——"

"Please don't!" she interrupted. "Long before he could come—I should be dead. It is so much better! Did you think, Paul, that I could have you—tied for life—to a poor, hunted woman—forced to live always in a foreign country? Oh! no, no! I have had this poison by me ever since—in case—anything happened. Paul, carry me—to the sofa! There is—no pain—but I am getting weaker—very weak. My eyes are a little dim, too—but I can see you—Paul!"

He obeyed her, and sank on his knees, with his arms still around her. It seemed to him that she had never been so lovely as in those last few minutes of her life. It was wonderful to see her resigned as she was.

There was a brief silence, broken only by a sharp, convulsed sob from the kneeling man. Adrea, who heard it, stretched out her hand, and passed it caressingly along the side of his face. He caught it and covered it with kisses.

"Paul, we have been happy together, have we not?"

"My darling, you know it!"

She raised herself a little, and spoke earnestly. "For me—it has been like heaven—and yet I am not sure—that it would have lasted. You would have wearied soon! My nature is too light a one to have satisfied you always. I have felt it! I—I know it!"

She paused, struggling for breath. He did not answer her. He only held her tighter, and whispered her name lovingly. In a moment she re-opened her eyes.

"So—it is best—" she continued, with a little more effort. "Paul, things seem all so clear—to me now! I think of you in the future—it must be a happy future, Paul—I know it will! I see you the master of that grand old home of yours, up amongst the moors you love so much. I can see you there in the future, living your quiet, country life—always the same, honourable and just. I like to think of you there—it is so natural. I want you—to forget—these days then! Remember that it was—I—who—came to you, Paul! You had no—choice. I would come. If there has been—any sin—it has been—mine only. You were far above—poor me! I have dragged you down—a little way—but you will go back again! You will marry—some one good and worthy of you. It is my —last wish! God bless you, Paul, dear—dear, Paul! I think that I am—going now—kiss me!"

"My love! My love! Oh! that you could live to be happy with me once more!"

"There are steps upon the stairs—I think—but they come—too late! The book on the table—take it! It will—tell you—what you do not know—of my life!

Farewell! Sister Elise! Is that you? Ah! back once more—in the old convent garden! How sweet—and gentle—the air is—and what perfumes! You here, Paul! You too! How dim your face seems—and yet —how happy it makes me—to see it. Dear Paul! we have been—so happy! Farewell!"

* * * * *

There were strangers in the room, but they came too late. They found only the corpse of a woman, whose deadlips were parted in a strangely sweet smile, and a strong man who had swooned by her side in the utter abandonment of his grief. The hand of human justice had been stayed by God's mercy!

THE END.

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